St. Francis of Assisi

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Franciscan Herald Press

1434 West 51st Street

Chicago, Illinois 60609

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Manselli, Raoul.
St. Francis of Assisi.

Translation of: San Francesco d'Assisi.
Bibliography: p.
1. Francis, of Assisi, Saint, 1182-1226.
2. Christian saints—Italy—Assisi—Biography. 3. Assisi (Italy)—Biography. I. Title.
BX4700.F6M34513 1988 271'.3'024 [B] 88-7095
ISBN 0-8199-0880-0

Cover illustration, "Francis and the Leper": Edmund Mundwiller, O.F.M.

Cover design: William Dichtl & Blane O'Neill, O.F.M.

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Preface

Setting aside every pre-Raphaelite refinement and rejecting on purpose the ornaments of an anecdotal approach that is liable to affectation, we set out to present Francis of Assisi against the concrete background of his own time as an historical personality with all his own human and dramatic greatness. On that account, we have used Francis' own writings and the sources most immediately and directly close to him, without taking into account those that either place him in a theology of history, as the great Bonaventure did, or that display him as a model of Franciscans at an angle that, for various reasons, is ultimately distorting because of its connection with the internal contrasts in the order; this is the case, for example, with the *Actus beati Francisci et sociorum eius,* more familiar to us as the *Little Flowers of St. Francis.*

We have attempted, instead, by means of a critical exposition of the bonds between a man and the religious, political, and social reality that enveloped him, to understand and grasp the central inspiring motive of his life and work as they functioned within that reality in order to change and renew it in the light of a model relived with total immediacy, that offered by Jesus Christ in the New Testament and, in particular, in the Gospels. This theme has seemed to us to be even more valid, complex,

and profound than the usual one of poverty, since it is characterized and specified by an existential and complete adherence to the life of Christ in his bonds with men, taken in their supratemporal and eternal values.

The fundamental and decisive moments of Francis' existence, then, are examined, such as the primary fact of his conversion in the framework of Assisian society; the formation of the brotherhood; approval of it on the part of Innocent III; its slow but progressive penetration among the common people, who were at first hostile but then became enthusiastic; and finally the triumph, the affirmation of his ideal—menaced by its very success—of his love for men, all the greater the more they were unhappy and suffering. From this point of view, the bond between the man Francis and his time becomes closer and more alive. In spite of his physical pain and external contradictions, Francis countered with serenity and peace those problems that racked the Church with dissension. His own writings, from the short works of edification to the "Canticle to the Sun" and to the *Testament*, embody his personality and, together, shed light on it in a perfect correspondence of life and writings. There also emerges a religious practice that in many respects is new, which, drawing upon feeling and ordinary life, follows progressively to an ever more inspired level of liturgy, taken in its most authentic sense.

A work like this owes a great deal to a great number of people, and not all of them can be acknowledged here. Another edition complete with critical apparatus—omitted here in order not to weigh down a work that is intended to be read rather than studied—will provide the discussion that justifies every statement and clarifies every theme of interpretation. For now, we present this edition to anyone who wants to grasp the historical significance of Francis of Assisi in his own time, as well as in the values that he proposed to all people of every time.

A heartfelt word of thanks goes to Prof. E. Pásztor for having kindly helped me in correcting the drafts.

* * *

This interpretation of Francis is based principally on these sources: Thomas de Celano, *Vita prima S. Francisci Assisiensis et eiusdem legenda ad usum chori*, Ad Claras Aquas (Quaracchi) 1926 (cit. *Vita prima*); Thomas de Celano, *Vita secunda S. Francisci Assisiensis*, Ad Claras Aquas (Quaracchi) 1927 (cit. *Vita secunda*); T. Desbonnets, "*Legenda trium sociorum*. Edition critique," in *Archivium Franciscanum Historicum* 67 (1974), pp. 89-144 (cit. *Legend of the Three Companions*); "Compilatio Assisiensis" from the writings of Fr. Leone and companions on St. Francis of Assisi, *I^a edizione integrale dal Ms. 1046 di Perugia . .. a cura di M. Bigaroni*, Porziuncola 1975 (cit. *Legenda Perusina / Compilatio Assisiensis*).

The writings of St. Francis have been critically edited by K. Esser in his *Die Opuscula des hl. Franziskus von Assisi, Textkritische Edition*, Grottaferrata 1976 (Spicilegium Bonaventurianum, 13).

RAOUL MANSELLI

I

Europe and the Church at the End of the Twelfth Century

The second half of the twelfth century was without doubt one of the most stormy and tense epochs in the history of Europe and of the Western Church. The grave schism of 1130 had ended not long before. St. Bernard, at the peak of his prestige, strove to bring into reality the ideal of the Church that had been maturing and asserting itself since the reform in the eleventh century. This ideal advanced with the changes and the realities that the new cultural and spiritual forces were carrying decisively forward, despite difficulties of every kind. This generated a conflict between the old and the new which often coexisted in a given individual, as in the case, for example, of St. Bernard himself. As a Cistercian he met the demands of a new monasticism, since it was more rigorous, more committed to work and poverty than was demanded by the new rural and urban society that formed after the year 1000. Yet precisely because he was a monk bound to a traditional theological culture, he differed from the new theology that was developing in the university schools, especially at Paris, as is evident in the works of Abelard and Gilbert de la Porrée. Bernard reproached the monks of Cluny and their abbot Peter the Venerable for allowing relatively comfortable and pleasant living conditions in the abbey instead of a severe practice of

penance. Yet he took their side in appearing before sovereigns, prelates, nobles, and even before the pope himself. His general purpose was the formation of an ecclesiastical hierarchy more worthy of its function, more dedicated to the performance of its duties, more committed to the care of souls. Thus, when a Cistercian monk became pope as Eugene III, Bernard did not hesitate to address to him one of his most fervent and impassioned books entitled *De consideratione.* This book, among theological reflections, spiritual exhortations, and discussions of various topics, contains as well one of the harshest criticisms of the trafficking by the Roman curia, of its abuses, of its bent for litigation, of everything, in brief, that he looked upon as corruption.

St. Bernard, then, had lived out on many levels the dramas of his time. By his time it was clear that the Church did not extend to the limits of all humanity. The world of pagans was quite large, extending beyond the Nordic peoples on the Baltic and throughout the Moslem east. In the Holy Land, the Muslims—no longer considered to be only schismatics but now clearly as believers in a different religion—pressed their threat, overrunning the crusader states in Syria and Palestine. These states then sought help from the West in the form of materials and men. Further, toward the middle of the century, Bernard had to acknowledge that the little foxes spoken of in the Song of Songs had entered the Lord's vineyard; the exegesis of that period commonly interpreted the foxes to be heretics. Heretics had indeed come to flourish within the Church, in northern and southern France, in Germany, and in Italy.

The experience of an excursion into southern France, to Toulouse and its surrounding regions, had left Bernard with both bitterness and satisfaction: at Toulouse, he clearly had reduced to silence and driven into flight a monk by the name of Henry, a dangerous preacher of ideas hostile to the hierarchy and to church discipline. The proponent of a radical poverty and, in its name, a harsh critic of rich and powerful clergy, Henry had gained

the support of all, whether truly poverty-stricken folk or nobles opposed to church property, who had a specific reason to combat the Church. On this occasion Bernard had also met up with new heretics—they would turn out to be Cathars—who, in a small town called Verfeil, had greeted him with total aversion and with unmistakable signs of disgust. They had indeed listened to his words, had seemed convinced, but only on the surface. One of those who accompanied Bernard was his secretary Godfrey of Clairvaux who was deeply shaken by these heretical manifestations for the rest of his life. He made the comment that to effect some real change among those people it would take not three days but rather three years.

This experience, along with the evident resistance to conversion on the part of Slavic pagans and of Moslems in Palestine and Spain, affected Bernard. At first, he was indecisive on the issue of missionary preaching versus St. Augustine's attitude of *compelle intrare,* (i.e., forced conversion), but was led more and more to favor a policy of coercion, stated clearly in his preaching for the second crusade. He expressed it even more clearly in his book *De militia Templi,* the breviary, as it were, of armed conflict against Christianity's pagan enemies. We mention it here since Bernard's attitude in some ways is parallel to the concept of a just and even holy war that developed progressively from the first crusade onward. Bernard extended and articulated the concept organically. It also acquired strength, if not intrinsic merit, from his personal intervention in the matter, from his conviction, and from the charm of his words. The Church and Christian society of the twelfth century followed him and definitively abandoned the other position that for a long time had kept its validity and efficacy: conversion that was peaceful and perhaps slow, but effective and, above all, sincere.

St. Bernard thus had definitively dominated and given direction in certain ways to the life of the Church up till the middle of the twelfth century. He died in 1153; yet his impact lasted well beyond his lifetime. That heretics and infidels in general should be hunted down by force of

arms was a principle that remained accepted by other monks who, like him, themselves also Cistercians, combatted them in southern France. Yet they did not realize that armed might was not enough to stop heresy when the weakness, if not the corruption, of the clergy tended to favor heresy. In addition, there was the contrast of the wealth and power of the bishops, canons, and abbots with the strict lives of the preachers of heresy, the so-called perfect ones. These were poor ascetics, gaunt from fasting, committed to a rigorous respect for chastity, and capable of spreading rich ideas that fascinated the faithful who, perhaps ignorant, were also thirsty for the divine and suffering for a word of consolation and comfort.

How did these Catharist missioners present themselves? The technique became quickly known and kept its effectiveness for nearly two centuries. The preacher would begin with pointing out the faults, frequent and undeniable, of the clergy and then would compare them with his own life, hard and austere. The touchstone clearly was the poor, tormented, and persecuted life of Christ, the carpenter's son, hated by the scribes and Pharisees, forced to flee from one territory to another, and in the end crucified. Who was more like him—the rich priest or the poor heretic? The answer was fairly easy, as was another conclusion: the heretic, therefore, was the keeper of the one truth that had abided for centuries among a few elect and now had returned to daylight, a salvific truth that was the only possible way of redemption.

What was this truth that was revealed only to those who deserved full and secure trust? The world in which man lives out his earthly life is evil. According to one segment of this heresy, the one most widespread in northern and central Italy, yet present elsewhere as well, the material universe (including animals) is the creation of the first of the angels, a rebel against God and thus expelled by him from paradise along with all the accomplices to the rebellion. Their spiritual principles were gradually incorporated, from Adam and Eve onward, into human beings, who thus became the prisons of the angels. They

passed from one body to another by means of the sexual act. Then God, taking pity on their unfortunate condition, sent Jesus, the angel closest to him, to earth to teach men the way of liberation. Jesus had the appearance of incarnation in another angel in the form of a woman, Mary, and in human guise had preached the possibility of salvation. Toward this end it was necessary to practice the most perfect chastity, abstain from meat, eggs, milk, and all other food produced by sexual union. Then one would receive the laying on of hands, a rite of initiation that corresponded in some way to baptism and to priestly ordination. For these heretics, then, the individual became a sharer in the goodness of God to the extent that he had obeyed the prescription of this faith, the process of liberation for fallen angels: he joined with God in restoring good order and thus achieved the final end which God himself had designated. We need not think, however, that faith—the moderate kind of Catharism—was bone-dry: if indeed it came across as rich in gospel elements, taken in their most literal value and meaning, it also added to the biblical texts a series of mythical embellishments drawn from apocryphal texts of Byzantine and ultimately oriental origin. Indeed, the heresy had come into the West at an uncertain date estimated to be in the first decades of the twelfth century, from the Balkan region and as seems more precise, from Bulgaria.

In itself this heresy was rich in myths and based on biblical texts. A second wave of the same heresy, even more radical, came from the Orient between 1160 and 1170. This version asserted a clearly dualistic concept: there were two equal and clearly opposed principles, God and Satan, one at the head of the spiritual kingdom and the other of the material kingdom. The latter, taking advantage of the goodness of God who is completely incapable even of thinking of fraud and deception, succeeded in sending one of his creatures, camouflaged as an angel of light, to seduce the angels themselves. He then drew them over with himself into the kingdom of evil and imprisoned them on earth, which is hell, in the

material bodies of living beings. Here they can transmigrate by means of a real metempsychosis from one body into another: those who enter human bodies can live well or badly; if they are evildoers, according to their faults, they pass over and animate women or animals. For these other Cathars as well, redemption comes from the good God and from Jesus; whoever follows their liberating teaching and norms of life, which are completely identical with those of the first Catharism, gains freedom and salvation.

It is difficult today to realize the fascination that the Catharist heresy in its various forms—the second one just described here was spread through southern France, less so in Italy—could exert on the faithful of the twelfth and following centuries. Of course, we must grant that the strictness of life of the Catharist masters by itself, as we mentioned earlier, constituted an element of respect and therefore of attraction. From what we know from many sources, there is also the fact that their preaching was always and only in the vernacular, in a simple and plain style accessible to all. We may also add that the gradual and progressive revelation of the various doctrines gave the heresy a vague aura of mystery with the assertion of a final goal, as yet unknown yet of certain truth, revealed as absolute and undoubtable. The importance of this doctrine has been underestimated. In its diverse forms, it seemed nonetheless to give a supernatural explanation that was mythical (and yet managed to give the appearance of logical validity) about a reality that was essentially, for the individual as well as for the masses, quite hard and painful. Southern France, in particular, was burdened in its political situation by the tension between lay and church nobility; by the decadence and moral condition of its clergy, about which St. Dominic is an irrefutable witness; and by the restlessness of the faithful who were well disposed toward the teachers of the heresy. Under these conditions, the heresy there penetrated to all levels of society. It drew as well upon the support that the great lay nobles accorded to the Catharist perfected ones. It

also relied upon the people's good will that not only allowed untroubled and free dissemination of the new beliefs but also protected, aided, and defended their missionaries. Even among the lower clergy there was no lack of priests who at least allowed the Cathars or, as they were called in that region, Albigenses, to function without any difficulty. There were even actual public debates between Catholics and heretics, with arbiters chosen from both sides to decide on the eventual victors.

Southern France and then northern and central Italy were the Church's sore areas. We need not think, however, that other countries of Europe were immune to them. Northern France, Germany, and especially the lands along the Rhine endured notably heavy infiltrations. Decisive and effective measures, however, almost immediately had the effect of blocking them with results that were often dramatically quick. Along these lines, the experience of the Cathars in England was quite typical. They attempted, as far as we know, to penetrate the island, but were either turned back at sea, or worse, without further ado, burned at the stake.

At any rate, it is worth noting that the Church did not immediately realize the true danger that these heretics actually represented for her. The simplistic crudity of their ideas, in contrast with the complex articulation that had been achieved in theology and canon law between monastic and university schools, led the hierarchy more to scorn and underestimate than to correctly evaluate their importance. Only slowly did popes and bishops realize the danger arising in Germany where, against the heretics, Hildegard of Bingen worked with her visions. At the same time, through the help of her pious friend, Elizabeth of Schönau, Hildegard succeeded in having the latter's brother, Egbert, write a thorough rebuttal. The heretics, understood as continuers and renewers of the ancient Manichaens, were combatted through the use of the great body of works written specifically against the Manichaeans by St. Augustine. However, it was only in the second half of the century that the full awareness of

the heretics' menace took root. It emerged through the Cistercian missions directed by Abbot Henry of Citeaux (later cardinal bishop of Albano). Yet above all, this awareness emerged through the realization of how much support and aid the heretics found not only in France but also in the Italian cities (although these were committed to the struggle against Emperor Frederick Barbarossa and allied with the pope). Suffice it to say that even Milan, the city most faithfully allied with the pope, was so full of heretics that it was called by an expression that later became commonplace: *fovea hereticorum,* den of heretics. Over a long period their list comprised the names of so many groups that a historian today is not in a position to assign any meaning or content to them.

A new attitude developed in the Church toward the heretics. After having tried, before and after St. Bernard, the approach of reasoning persuasion, it was decided to seek the support of the political power, or, as it was called then, the secular arm. At the assembly of Verona in 1184, Frederick Barbarossa and the new pope, Lucius III, joined together in agreement on a solemn condemnation of the heretics, by whatever name, with excommunication on the Church's part and with the ban, i.e., with exclusion from the juridical, political, and civil community on the imperial level, the state equivalent of excommunication. These were penalties, within the medieval reality of life, that were quite serious because they amounted to a real elimination from religious and lay society. We must immediately note, however, that these measures soon turned out to be ineffective for the simple reason that the heretics found themselves aided everywhere; thus every concrete effect of the ban was nullified.

Among the heresies condemned at Verona, besides that of the Cathars, was the Waldensian. It erupted shortly after the middle of the twelfth century in Lyon as the stormy conclusion of a dramatic spiritual happening. We cannot overlook its essential aspects: its protagonist was Waldo, a rich married merchant with two daughters. Struck by the reading of the gospel or, as also it seems,

by the famous legend of St. Alexius, or both, he decided to abandon his life of sin. In the common opinion of that age, mercantile activity was considered to be the way of life that most easily led to damnation, so much so that some considered a trader to be damned as a matter of course. On that account Waldo set his daughters up in residence in the monastery of Fontevrault, then sold his possessions—in accordance with Jesus' advice to the rich young man—in order to distribute the proceeds among the poor, and dedicated himself to preaching.

His conversion both made an impression and gave rise to worries and doubts in the hierarchy—not without reason. Throughout the eleventh century, and especially since the beginning of the twelfth, wandering preachers who taught the duty of poverty as the best means for attaining salvation had not only gathered many followers but had also succeeded in spreading a more lively and intense religiosity. It can be summarized as the demand for the fullest and most complete adherence to the counsels of Jesus in the gospel, among which the first were those of poverty and purity of customs. When this adherence was lacking, the restlessness exploded into a display of boycotts of unworthy priests, into biting polemics that often spilled into action. The history of European cities is studded with episodes of contrasts between the faithful and their clergy. Some of the latter invoked the permanent and total respect that belonged to them by the mere fact of being clerics. Others, however —and not only wandering hermits and preachers of rigorism—pointed out the opportunity, if not the duty, of combatting human corruption in the Church, wherever and however they found it. As it was, this was the position of St. Bernard. Since this attitude allowed for polemics against established authority and often had caused trouble and worry, it found itself accused of hypocritical ostentation and of outright ambition.

With no difficulty, then, we can see how and why Waldo's "conversion" could stir up the hostility and worry of the archbishop of Lyon, Jean de Belles-Mains, who

moreover had the responsibility of authorizing Waldo's preaching. Even though the sequence of events is not securely established, it seems that, as a result of a number of initial difficulties, Waldo, or (according to some sources) his delegates, went to Rome to the Third Lateran Council. Under the directives of Alexander III, this council had the task of reorganizing the whole Church, such as it had come out of the schism of Victor IV and his successors after the quarrel with Barbarossa. On this occasion Waldo or the Waldensians found a favorable reception with the pontiff; but once they returned home, their activity seems to have rekindled doubts and suspicisons. Since a charge of heresy had been leveled at Waldo, he made a solemn profession of faith, equivalent to the abjuration of each and every error. In it, as is shown by the last part of the document that has come down to us, the legitimacy of his *propositum* is acknowledged. His intention was accepted of following the gospel of Jesus not only in its *percepta* (i.e., in the norms applicable to everyone), but also in its *consilia*, in those recommendations, then, that were given for those who aspired to a higher perfection. Among these counsels were poverty and brotherly exhortation to penance. However—as an eyewitness to this ceremony recounted—shortly thereafter the differences with the archbishop started up again, from which Waldo took his reasons for ultimately withholding his obedience to the archbishop and for breaking off from the entire hierarchy. Thus the complex of attitudes—not so much a system of ideas—slowly coalesced under the name of Waldensianism. Its fundamental theses were the necessity of poverty and preaching; the denial of the validity of sacraments administered by unworthy priests; the nonrecognition of the juridical and disciplinary authority of the hierarchy; a specific intention to adhere to the evangelical counsels that reduced itself, on a practical level to radical pacifism; the refusal to take any oath; disobedience to the precepts of the Church insofar as they did not have their basis in sacred Scripture and especially in the gospel. Waldensianism—we do not know exactly how much goes

back to Waldo himself, since he seems to have disappeared from history in the last years of the twelfth century—spread rapidly and widely, favored by the critical attitude toward the hierarchy and by the importance that it accorded to individual believers, insofar as it gave to each one the awareness of one's own worth as a Christian. It was no less favored, however, by its doctrinal flexibility which allowed it to absorb and include local demands and positions of religious unrest already within the Church. This occurred in Italy, where Waldensianism became the focal point for earlier ferments of heresy. For example, it accepted those who held work rather than poverty to be necessary for salvation. These were known as the Poor of Lombardy in order to distinguish themselves from the Poor of Lyon, the Waldensians strictly speaking, who had remained closer and more tied to those of France. Within the range of these movements there falls another, characteristically Lombard and even Milanese, the *Umiliati* who were woolworkers bound together by the technical demands of their trade but still more so by their desire for the consecration of the work of weavers. They expressed this in common prayers and in group preaching, in which both married and unmarried people participated. One important point about the *Umiliati* is that they placed in common the revenues from their work, just as the first Christian community in Jerusalem had, in order that all might equally have the necessities of life. No less interesting is the fact that they did not produce expensive fabrics, but rather those of modest quality—the cloth of the humble, *berettino* in color (i.e., natural, not dyed)—so as to be able to sell it at the lowest price and thus supply the needs of the poorest. Then, when they were quickly recovered by the Church, the *Umiliati* formed a true community of work. The lay people themselves, in early days of the movement, formed its hierarchy, while some priests provided for the care of souls and for the distribution of the sacraments, until Pope Innocent III, in the first years of the thirteenth century, reorganized them into a kind of religious order

with its own typical and characteristic structure.

All these phenomena, whether heretical or not, clearly tell us of a liveliness and intensity of religious life, such as were never felt before, but with a new characteristic: vast, wide, aware participation on the part of the laity that wanted to be ever more involved and present in the reality of the Church. It is worth our trouble at this point to draw attention to a fact that helps us also to better understand Francis of Assisi himself. During the first half of the twelfth century, there were primarily monks, hermits, and churchmen who sought to give a response to the needs of the faithful; during the second half, however, the response came spontaneously from the hearts of the layfolk themselves. Without recourse to ecclesiastical intermediaries or with minimum contribution from them, they sought to resolve the spiritual problems that afflicted them.

We have mentioned the decadence and moral weakness of the clergy. At the same time, we cannot think that the schism of 1130 and the other one, much longer, provoked by the conflict between Alexander III and Frederick Barbarossa, could occur without consequences. Nor should we believe that his was the only conflict between political power and church power: the long, years-old quarrel between the king of England and the primate, the archbishop of Canterbury, in the second half of the century, had had a tragic conclusion in the assassination of Thomas Becket in 1170. True, King Henry II had had to humble himself in a public penance, but the fact still remained evident that in the course of a hundred years things had passed, with significant change of position, from the humiliation of the emperor named Henry IV to the slaughter of the highest representative of the Church in a kingdom. Europe, then, was changing.

Monasticism, from Cluniac to Cistercian formerly supportive of European life and civilization, seemed no longer to fulfill, at least not enough, its historic tasks. Its institutional entrenchment exposed it to the criticism of all those—mostly heretics, but not entirely—who accused

it of living an apparent, rather than a genuine, poverty. Nor were there lacking others who found fault with the monks' absence from pastoral activity (there was lively discussion during those decades between clerics and monks on the care of souls), while the contemplative life was easily mocked by those who considered them to be *papelardi*, i.e., freeloaders, lazy exploiters of the labor of others. Finally, the monks' very cultural activity, especially among the Cistercians, was in decline, and their evangelical work among the heretics of southern France, as among the Slavs and the Balts, yielded results that were, relatively speaking, modest.

The papacy was certainly powerful. Adrian IV had known how to relate smoothly to the young Frederick Barbarossa, capably avoiding any break. The break—already mentioned above—occurred with Alexander III, who had known well how to position himself on the political chessboard as well as in the religious arena in order to maintain equal power with the emperor. The pope was able to bind to himself, in a carefully measured game of alliances, the kings of France and England, of Castile and Aragon in the Iberian peninsula. He had not, however, been able to keep the obedience of the German episcopate. Still, a large part of the Italian episcopate remained faithful to the pope: they had formed havens in cities that were rebellious toward the emperor. Moreover, the entire ecclesiastical world in the Norman kingdom of Sicily was obedient to him *en bloc*.

It would be a grave error, however, to hold that this complexity of tensions, of spiritual attitudes, of religious movements was a sign of some crisis in European life. Rather, they were the manifestation of an energy expressed and directed in the most diverse ways but with intense force and new vigor. One who looks at the broad panorama of Europe today is especially impressed by a fact that is more manifest now than in preceding ages. With near certainty, this fact explains and clarifies the meaning of everything that has been said until now. So much diversity, nearness, and change is traced to a

phenomenon that after the millenium was proving to be ever more decisive: the emergence and the continued presence of the cities.

In the entire high Middle Ages, rural life predominated on all levels. The economic, social, cultural, and religious phenomena proceed from the fact that it was a universe of warriors and peasants, as well described by one of our contemporary historians, Georges Duby. In the year 1000, there was in all of Europe, especially in Italy, an expansion of existing cities and a progressive formation and consolidation of new ones. To use an oft-cited yet ever-valid metaphor of the chronicler Rodolfo Glabro, Europe began to be covered by white cathedrals; for where there is a cathedral, there is a city. In the thrust of their expansion, the cities of Roman origin in Italy were enriched with new buildings and were given new institutions. Although outside of the Italian peninsula cities were important, especially in southern France and in Flanders, in Italy they assumed a special prominence and meaning. It is significant for us to remember it here, so as to understand better the historical personality of St. Francis of Assisi.

All those who were inhabitants of a city and were, so to speak, legally recognized, had the practice of meeting together in order to organize the defense of their autonomy. According to a current yet long-accepted explanation, the long absence of authority at the highest level had made possible for the cities to form an autonomy almost to the level of true independence. Cities developed their own political and administrative structure: a college of consuls headed the community, or commune, as it was sometimes called and governed with the support of a general assembly of citizens. The assembly was convened to decide—not always easily—whatever was necessary to do from time to time in order to meet various needs. In today's terms, this would be ordinary administration. This exchange between the ruling group and the citizens was made more necessary insofar as those who held power were limited by terms and therefore had to be elected periodically. Thus there matured in the communal

cities of Italy the concept of an authority that was not handed down from a king or feudal lord, by the grace of God, but was conferred instead by the citizens themselves. This authority was granted on the basis of a comparative choice, determined by the influence that each man could exercise upon the crowd, especially verbally. We do not at this point have to emphasize how this beginning was the opening event of democracy. Rather it is necessary to say that it produced a rejection, ever more clear and conscious, of noble privilege.

At the same time, these Italian cities began a policy of conquering surrounding territory, a policy which had two consequences of extreme importance. The territory, for the most part, was in the hands of feudal lords who, one by one, either of their own free will or by being compelled by force, had to subject themselves to a commune. Then, after having accepted a series of conditions (residence in the city for a set part of the year, construction of a dwelling, obligation of armed service for the commune in case of need, prohibition of support or aid for the enemies of the commune), they saw their authority reconfirmed in their county, normally in the same ways and forms that had existed before. Their authority, however, no longer derived from the sovereign or from the lord who had granted the fief, but rather from the commune alone. This difficult relation between communes and feudal lords was becoming slowly established amid ruthless conflicts and struggles, up to the end of the twelfth century, just around the time that Francis of Assisi was born. Indeed, the contrasts in those years became even sharper by reason of the increasingly solid and vigorous affirmation of a new social class strictly bound to the birth and development of the commune, the bourgeoisie or, as they said then, the people.

Another consequence of this expansion was that, in progressively extending its own territory, sooner or later each commune ran into conflict with surrounding communes that were also trying to extend their own spheres of influence. They often did this out of a need to secure

for themselves avenues of communication, to control a bridge or pass or road that would give them safer passage, the removal of a toll, or the elimination of danger. The commune, on the one hand, had to fight the county rulers and, on the other, had need of them in order to hold its own against neighboring cities. In this ongoing agitation and tension, if the nobles brought in the help of their military power and combat expertise, there was also need of financial resources that could come only from those who had money, namely, the bourgeoisie, the people.

It seems superfluous to note that this bourgeoisie had in common with modern bourgeoisie little more than the same name. In the period we are considering, there was a very developed and complex group of diverse economic conditions. The bourgeoisie, made up of simple artisans and sellers of the most varied products, included the great merchants. Among these latter, those who predominated were those who dealt in luxury textiles not produced locally but had to be imported from large distribution centers. These fabrics often came from international fairs such as those within the province of Champagne in France. Now it was these very merchants—one of whom was Waldo in Lyon—who achieved remarkable economic prosperity, partly because they often operated a monopoly through an agreed-upon division of tasks.

The figure of the trader who moved from region to region and from city to city with his pack of precious wares was gradually disappearing. Already by the end of the twelfth century the rich merchant had a great influence in the commune and competed with the nobles in a luxurious style of life, even though he was not equally expert in handling weapons. Yet soon he was competing on another level, no less important: culture. His very status and the forms that his activities took obliged the merchant to have a minimum of cultural education. In civil life every acquisition and sale required a notary document which had to be accurate if one did not want to incur unpleasant consequences. Moreover, payment could be made in cash or, as has always been true in

commerce, deferred. This imposed the need for reading, writing, and arithmetic. It was not by coincidence that the figure of the *magister puerorum* soon appeared in the form of a person to take charge of teaching these rudiments of knowledge. From the rudiments to a certain demand for refinement is but a short step, especially when we think that the merchant in his business, particularly in fine fabrics or costly articles, would end up in contact with nobility. He would feel all the attraction of assuming the essential attitudes of a privileged mode of life. Now, at the threshold of the thirteenth century, the style in Europe and thus in Italy was the one that had developed in southern France and spread everywhere: the life-style of the court.

It is not out of order at this point to recall the characteristics of this way of life, many of which we find in the young Francis and which gradually re-emerge at some of the decisive moments of his life. An essential point of courtly life was *fin'amor*, the absolute and total devotion to the lady one chose for one's own with the same fealty that a vassal owed to his lord. It was a matter, however, in its highest version, of a deep but spiritual bond from which the lover drew all the joy and satisfaction he could desire; its peak was reciprocity on the part of the woman loved. This *fin'amor* was not enough for becoming *cortesi*, because it had to be accompanied by a whole range of concomitant qualities that enriched and complemented it. First of all, the lover was to be *joven*, meaning that he ought to have the characteristics of elegance, finesse, courage, and dashing spontaneity. Regardless of age, a man graced with these qualities is spiritually young and feels that way owing to love for his lady. Closely connected with being *joven* was another quality: *largheza*, liberality, generosity in giving, first and foremost to the lady, but then to others as well, with a richness that was doubtlessly interior, but that manifested itself externally in giving to all without distinction.

Alongside these moral characteristics was the capacity, the art of declaring, in the most elegant manner possible

one's own feelings toward the lady in song, accompanied by instrumentation. This was, in a sense, the conclusive moment for courtly life. In the lyrical exaltation of the lady, it succeeded in attaining the supreme interior balance as a synthesis of all these qualities. In the language of this style of life, this balance was called *mezura*.

The courtly way of life found its observers in Italy at first among nobility but also among the rich element of the people, those whose financial means permitted them the economically burdensome commitment of *largheza*. One difference stands out, however, between the courtly affectation of the lord and that of the merchant: the former had for its background and theater a castle and court, whether noble or royal. The merchant, however, had to create a courtly manner based on his own environment that was not restricted and closed in a circle of nobles but rather broader, more open, richer with resonances and echos of the streets and squares of a city. This fact alone brought on a train of consequences insofar as it spread the values of courtliness on different levels and in new directions. In place of a group of nobles around a lady, there emerged a brigade of young men; in place of the exacting melodies of the troubadour, there emerged the freer form of the serenade at the balconies of lovely women. The dance would take place in the square; arrogant jokes would become mocking jokes.

Ordinary citizens, then, were transforming courtly life, while seeking to conserve its essentials and to maintain its basic and characteristic values. When they realized that they could not duplicate the demeanor of the nobles totally, they nonetheless attempted to assimilate it as much as possible, even to the point of imitating nobles in their most visible trait: the bearing of arms. Already in the middle of the twelfth century, Bishop Otto of Friesing wrote an account of the Italian communes that was full of contemptuous scorn but that was accurate in describing specific details. In it he brought out, as the fact he considered to be the most scandalous, the point that some merchants dared to gird themselves with a knight's

cincture, thus breaking the strict division of the three orders, of priests, of warriors, and of others—peasants, laborers, and merchants. This division of orders seemed to constitute a meaningful structure for medieval society.

It must, then, be even more significant that Francis, a youth from an Italian city, was one who attempted to breach the medieval barriers. First of all, he dared to aspire to become a courtier and a knight, having been first a merchant, although rich. He then had the nerve to break down still another of the social barriers of his time. He, a layman, gave himself over to a life of penance and, without being a priest, wanted to be among those who preached. He thus overturned—with no revolutionary intention but only with the effect of his action—still another of the pillars of the society in which he lived, namely, the strict division of the orders.

Still, as we shall see, Francis' greatest importance would be that of having crossed all these social barriers in order to point to an even higher goal: to recover, by means of an immediate return to the gospel example of Jesus Christ, the deepest sense of human existence.

At any rate, all this was the result of an evolution that, for its point of departure—it was said—had a concrete place, Assisi, in the specific reality of its problems. We should now turn our attention to them.

II

Assisi in the Twelfth Century

Assisi was an ancient Roman city and home of the poet Propertius. By reason of its geographical position on the slope of Mt. Subasio, it held a place of great strategic importance in the Middle Ages for the control of the roads that led from Foligno to Perugia or that reached all the way to Spoleto. In the second half of the twelfth century, Assisi was the forward point of the imperial duchy of Spoleto heading toward Perugia. Perugia, on the other hand, along with the greater part of Umbria, was under the influence of the Church, from which it received the necessary support for staving off the expansionist tendencies of the empire itself.

Proof of Assisi's particular importance, including its situation in the area of the duchy of Spoleto, is found in a document of Frederick Barbarossa of November 21, 1160, that conferred a particularly broad autonomy upon the city based on its own merits. It was allowed thereby to control its own internal development, free from any intervention by higher powers, even of the duke himself. It is thus significant that, when the Norman princess Constance d'Altavilla arrived from Sicily on the journey that was to take her to Milan for her wedding with Henry of Hohenstaufen (the future Henry VI), Frederick awaited her at Assisi in all his imperial majesty. He then accompanied

her to the borders of the territory within which he held supreme authority.

It was, then, with some bitterness and resentment that the city had to accept within its walls and in its castle one of the German "ministerials" that Henry VI retained in his confidence: Conrad of Lützelhardt, duke of Spoleto. Conrad stayed often at Assisi, probably because of its aforementioned military and strategic importance. It is also possible that the little Frederick Roger, son of Henry VI and Constance, lived part of his very early life in the castle. His mother, after giving birth to him at Jesi on December 26, 1196, had left him with Conrad's wife before continuing on her trip to Sicily. If this did happen—and it is extremely probable—then for a short time there lived in the same place the two men who were destined to leave the deepest mark on their own time, one in a solemn and imposing castle, the other in the house of a wealthy merchant.

Conrad of Lützelhardt was not loved by the inhabitants of Assisi. They took to calling him "fly-in-the-brain" in order to show what a bizarre lunatic he was. Upon the death of Henry VI, he had to confront many difficulties in resisting—without success—the pressure from Innocent III, the new pope. Innocent, successor to a series of venerable old men, decided to undertake a policy of reclamation that finally gained for the Church those territories that so many solemn imperial documents had promised, without the Church's ever being able to lay hands on them. The pontiff's efforts, expended with shrewd ability, ran aground at—among other places—Assisi itself. The city had certainly not loved the German duke, and yet neither did it want to end up under papal authority and, as a fatal consequence, under the predominance of Perugia, Assisi's great and certain rival.

Without entering into minute details of these complicated political maneuvers, it will suffice to say that Assisi sought the support of Philip of Swabia. Assisi also moved with extreme prudence so as not to rouse the ire of Otto IV. In reality, the absence of any higher authority, whether

imperial or papal, had also allowed for the eruption of conflicts resulting from internal differences between the nobles of the county, who had been forced to move into the city, and the so-called *minores*; this designation was used by those who were not nobles, yet who otherwise assumed, as mentioned earlier, the more generic title of "the people." Amid these internal tensions arose the antagonism of Assisi with Perugia as well. This permitted the nobles some movement between the cities with the hope of lessening the pressure upon them stemming from Assisi.

Francis was already a youth of twenty-one years when, in 1203, the first great peace was established between nobles and people. This peace revealed how grave was the division of minds among the nobles and how there was no complete agreement among them. Proof of this was the fact that while many of the lords were readmitted into the city and were granted pardon for all the conflicts that had provoked such deep internal discord, others nonetheless saw their sentences reaffirmed and stiffened because they had come from Perugia's area and were firmly bound to that city. Still another indication of the differing attitudes that coexisted within the noble class was the fact that some of them seemed to obey papal directives with attentive and respectful faithfulness. The historians of Assisi and the very biographers of Francis have not always paid due attention to the expedition of Count Gentile in Apulia. The dashing young son of the merchant wanted to take part in this campaign in order, by means of this venture in arms, to gain noble status for himself. In reality, this expedition was tied in with the worry that Innocent III had for the situation in the kingdom of Sicily: full and complete anarchy prevailed there owing to the minor age of the sovereign, Frederick Roger, who passed from hand to hand on the distant island. Meanwhile, every lord in southern Italy enjoyed virtually total independence, with all the conflicts, abuses, and pretensions that can easily be imagined.

Along the border of what we could already term the

Papal States, Innocent III succeeded in gaining some level of order by intervening among the various lords and by making use of the support he had from the powerful abbey of Monte Cassino. Because of the anarchy, he had to resort to volunteer forces in order to bring about a minimum of order in the outlying regions of the south of Italy: Apulia, Basilicata, and Calabria. We know of troops, or rather conscripts, that were sent at various times as a show of force of a political power that was actually wavering. Count Gentile, mentioned by some Franciscan sources, must have been the commander of one of these companies. In them we ought to recognize an early trace of what would be mercenaries from the fourteenth century onward. What we know of Francis—and we will return to him shortly—makes us believe that he enlisted in a group on a personal and voluntary basis with a desire not for profit but for glory.

We have mentioned the peace between nobles and people—not enough to effect concord. Differences reared up, and Perugia intervened again with heavy force of arms. Assisi accepted the challenge and its citizens, including Francis, intervened in defense of their native city. The decisive encounter at midpoint between the two cities, in 1202, settled nothing. As was then frequent, a good number of prisoners were taken; among them was Francis. As we shall see, he regained his freedom within a year. Even though the sources say nothing about it, we can presume his father's intervention with a good ransom. After all, it was the custom at that time.

The sketch of civic life that we have drawn up until this point, will be completed by what we know—which is not much—about the economic situation of Assisi. We have the general impression that, unlike people of other Italian cities, the Assisians, remaining within the city walls, did not have rich landed property. Property tended to be in powerful hands, such as those of the great ecclesiastical groups, e.g., the Benedictines of Subasio (landholders of the area overlooked by the little church of St. Mary of the Portiuncula, as we shall see later), the

abbey of Sassovivo, and also the abbey of St. Peter in Perugia. The feudal lords were also landowners. Their importance has already been discussed since, despite the contrasts and difficulties mentioned earlier, they exercised over their county a power delegated from the city whose authority they acknowledged. We know little as well about its economic life and patterns. It is, of course, easy to assign to it a series of activities that an urban community of a certain size required. There was a marketplace; there was no lack of smiths and artisans. As elsewhere, there were plenty of scriveners to handle documents dealing with all kinds of business. At the pinnacle of economic life stood the mercantile class with all its variety of commerce: import of precious fabrics and their sale along with the less precious ones of local manufacture. The movement of money—not without financial operations—was normally taken for granted; this fact was the basis for the moral doubts over usury. No less important from a psychological standpoint was the more diverse and higher status that was granted to merchants. They not only saw their work appreciated in the world in which they lived, but they also introduced a new mentality that preceded the one later called capitalism. It is a mentality in which profit holds a place of first importance, understood especially as accumulation of money. Of course, money was utilized right away for acquiring new merchandise but desired also in itself for its spending possibilities, disposable for the goods and the pleasures of the rich. In this real context of life the *Legenda trium sociorum* offers an exact analysis of a merchant's psychology as understood by a man working in a city. In addition, the long polemic of Thomas of Celano against Francis' family, as well as against the son's education, corresponds fully to the moralistic judgment of those who shared the opinion that a merchant and his family, whatever their position, were in themselves condemned to be lost: their chances for salvation were minimal and their activities were blameworthy through and through.

On the margins of this varied and complex background

we find the poor. As has been established by various scholars of the problem, in the cities—and Assisi was no exception—a condition of poverty had developed that was quite different from the poverty that for centuries, throughout the entire high Middle Ages, had prevailed in the countryside. The rural areas could suffer the scourge of famine without remedy if it were not for the charity of the monasteries or of other religious bodies, whose superiors had the foresight to prepare for eventualities of this kind. Outside of these events, not rare but not too frequent, the poor always found something in the countryside to allay their hunger or to clothe themselves with even temporarily. It helped that general indigence ended up establishing a solidarity among the poor.

In the city, however, misery of whatever origin—lack of work, harsh exploitation by those who assigned work, shortfall between earnings and resources required to support oneself and one's family—had no remedy whenever charitable institutions were not functioning. As it was, they were not always in a position to meet all the various and multiple needs that arose on every side. Still more difficult was the situation of those who were saddled with illnesses in addition to their poverty, which were then more widespread and frequent than today, owing to a lack of hygiene and of appropriate medicines. There were a fair number of hospitals which often responded more to the needs of travelers and of pilgrims than to aiding the recovery of the sick. The most serious and desperate situation was that of those who had been put under the ban. We refer here not to those condemned by political and religious authority, who sooner or later managed to find refuge among others who shared their attitudes; rather, we are speaking of the ones who, because of extreme misery, criminality, or horrible diseases (such as leprosy), were excluded, by law or by practice, from civil society.

These details that emerge from the documents of Assisi, as well as items from the biographical sources on St. Francis, give us a portrait of the city. We want now to point

out one last aspect, which in the terminology of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries (and afterward, of course) was known as *fama publica*. It is an element which in the course of the following centuries has gradually lost importance and effect; it corresponds, in many ways, to what is today called, in sociological terms, social control. It was of such breadth, however, as to include the entire citizenry in the diversity of its groups, especially when, as in the case of Assisi, the city was not very large in numbers. It was not limited, however, to following only one activity or another of the members of the community. *Fama publica* tended to want to know, if not to control and to oversee, people's behavior in its totality, sometimes accepting and rejecting, sometimes intervening in attack or in defense. There was, then, an uninterrupted and intense bond between each individual—even one of humble and modest station—and all the people who lived with him and shared in his existence. Thus a permanent dialogue existed between the individual and the group, a dialogue that could have its peak moments on specific occasions, such as the convening of a general assembly for war or peace, for the construction of a church, of a monastery, of a city square, or even for the arrival of a distinguished personage: a famous lord, a prince, a sovereign, or else a churchman of outstanding qualities. *Fama publica* made itself evident, then, in announcing a coming event, in giving information about the event's nature, in discussing particular details, as well as decisions to make. It could also show pitiless ferocity when someone erred, when one committed a fault, when one had some physical or psychological defects or limits. One sees signs of this in the Italian body of tales that are full of such occurrences, from the immoral priest to the betrayed husband, often exposed to people's mockery.

Indeed, we cannot grasp the psychology and action of Francis of Assisi if we forget the concrete background against which he acted and lived. His conversion can be understood fully only if we place it within the historical and geographical coordinates in which it occurred.

What we have said about the dialogue between the individual and the group, due to *fama publica*, will help us understand what Francis was before and after the encounter with the leper.

III

The Merchant

All the sources agree on one point: Francis of Assisi came from a wealthy family, even a very wealthy one, belonging to the highest level of the city's mercantile class. His father, Pietro *Bernardonis*—the then-current version of Bernardone—had a shop in Assisi. He specialized not in the production of woolen cloths, but in the trade of precious fabrics. Even though we do not know specific details and particulars of his activity, its meaning and importance are indicated by the fact that Pietro Bernardone traveled to France on business. He was therefore an importer of luxury fabrics which he sold, as was normal, with a high profit margin. Without doubt, he was a shrewd businessman if, as appears probable, it was he who amassed the family's fortune, which was immense at the time of his death. Likewise his children—Francis of Assisi had brothers and sisters, although only one, Angelo, shows up in later documents of the thirteenth century and afterward—had great financial resources and various houses. The long dispute over determining the saint's house of birth, even today not settled nor likely to be so unless by new and fortunate documentary discoveries, arises precisely from the fact that the family of Pietro Bernardone owned several houses, in any one of which Francis could have been born.

Certainly, there remains the unexamined fact of an uncommon wealth, a premise whose psychological importance is to be underscored with great emphasis if we are to understand the deep meaning of what are called the "dissipation" and the conversion of Francis. And this wealth—another detail worth highlighting—of the saint's father was matched in him by a love of money, by a desire to get more, by intense business activity. All of this was similar to attitudes of other merchants of his time. Today, we can summarize these attitudes as stemming from a mentality that was outright capitalistic. This term does not refer to industry but to what is commonly called commercial capitalism. It is this mentality that, in the encounter between father and son, will emerge with absolute clarity, causing *contempt* for Pietro Bernardone, along with accusations of hard-heartedness, of lack of understanding, even of malice. Let us not forget that, in this case, the facts were clear. What we know of Pietro, lacking any documentary evidence of any psychological significance, comes from the saint's biographers. They, being men of the Church, continue the centuries-old tradition of condemning mercantile activity, seen by them to be in itself sinful and a source of sins.

The long, harsh polemic that opens the first *Vita* by Thomas of Celano, must have deeply wounded Francis' family. It is, so to speak, one of the most fiery expressions of the ancient belief that wealth leads to evil and to dissipation. Wealth is temptation; it is a path to sin, leading parents into blameworthy laxity and into indulgence that ends up corrupting and wasting the souls of their very children.

To fill out this sketch of Pietro Bernardone on the basis of the little we know about him, we do not see a need to repeat the main elements already mentioned earlier. His "capitalistic" mentality required an education, whose breadth is unknown to us, but that had to include the capacity to read, write, and calculate, along with a knowledge, however elementary, of Latin. It has to be remembered that notaries wrote in Latin, albeit crudely

and without precision: through them, agreements in business, purchases, and sales were set down in Latin in the second half of the twelfth century. Interested parties had to be in a position to control the documents, at least in their essential points. Business trips must have forced Pietro to learn French. Francis, as his son, had to have learned it from him. As all the sources tell us with total agreement, Francis loved to sing in French. He could have learned it from no one else except his father, yet no mention of this is made. Perhaps the biographers preferred that the image given of the father in rather bleak tones not be mitigated at all.

We know even less about Francis' mother; her very name, Pica, emerges rather late and never at all in the most trustworthy sources relating to questions about Assisi, such as the *Legenda trium sociorum*. The assertion that she was Provençale in birth and origin appears even later, as does the claim that she came from Lucca. In the current state of documentation, the data are completely unverifiable. Meanwhile, other facets of her life are simply part of the natural order of things: her affectionate concern, her worry over her son's frail health—on this point the companions who aided him in his last years provide us with firm evidence. To her, her son seemed so similar at first to other young men and then so different and even more removed. He was heading toward a holiness that was as great as it was painful for a mother to grasp, even one with the deepest understanding. She is presented in a positive light by his biographers, to be sure. Only Thomas of Celano raises doubts on this point, and we have already examined the limitations concerning his judgment on Francis' family.

The biographers tell us more about the family, specifically about still another brother, Angelo, his father's shadow, remaining in the background. Yet they only tell us about his greed and about his desire to recover whatever Francis seemed to be squandering in a foolish desire to give it all away.

1 Birth and Youth

When was Francis born and under what circumstances? With everything that we would like to know, very little is certain. We do not know his birthdate—for medieval biographers, birth dates were facts of little note or importance—and the year itself varies between 1181 and 1182, since it is calculated back from the year of his death by subtracting the age attributed to him at the time of his death.

However, there is no lack of a whole run of edifying details. A beggar, as a new St. John the Baptist, is supposed to have announced in the city the birth of an exceptional creature. Francis' mother, beset with labor pains, was not succeeding in bringing him to term. She succeeded only when she went down to their stable where the son could finally come into the light of day. Here we must state at once that we are dealing with wholly legendary accounts that emerged well after Francis' lifetime and accumulated gradually. They represent a development of progressive enrichment that accompanied the formation of the image —a sociologist today would speak of "myth"—of Francis as a new Christ, *alter Christus*. He is supposed to have shared with Christ a series of impressive, significant, and providential analogies (*conformitates*, in the language of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries). It is necessary to have the courage to eliminate these encrustations and to restore the true image of the saint, if we want to give back to him, in the fullest and most complete way possible, his historical validity and meaning.

We know for certain that he was the first child, born while his father was on a business trip in France and that he was supposed to have been given the name of John which, when Pietro Bernardone returned (for the baptismal rite, perhaps delayed on his account?), was changed instead to that of Francis (*Francesco*). It has been pointed out that he was certainly not the first to have this name, although it was rare enough. One can, however, accept the traditional explanation of the name: in the language

of that epoch it corresponded to *francese*, French (*panni franceschi*, French cloths, were spoken of by merchants for another couple of centuries in referring to cloths coming from France). The name was chosen either to celebrate the good business closed during that trip or, even more probably, to commemorate an entire successful commercial activity in the name of a son.

We know nothing about his childhood or cultural formation. He must have been—yet what boy isn't?—rather lively and must have made his mother worry. In response to the protests and recriminations of neighbors, not concealing their displeasure over the boy's pranks, she is said to have declared in terms more or less like these, "But even he is a creature of God!"

What we know of his education is displayed in his writings, which—as we have already mentioned—reflect as well what Francis learned as time went on. His biblical knowledge, for example, broad and specific as it was, seems to have been more the result of his attentive and intense participation in the Church's liturgical life (thus, subsequent to his conversion) than from systematic reading of the Bible. He was able, at any rate, to use it well both in the vernacular—as seen in the Canticle of the Sun—and in his writings in Latin. His knowledge of Latin, as we have stated earlier, was adequate to the needs of a merchant; but in relation to the training of a well-rounded cleric, it was not really thorough and is rated as being modest. It was not always grammatically correct or polished, with passages often switching from Latin into the more familiar and customary vernacular. His knowledge of French must have been at the same level with the same characteristics. From what we know, with much conjecture, it was not a scholarly knowledge but a practical one, suited for the world of business and of entertainment. He loved songs more than anything else. It is worth noting as well that the source of Francis' linguistic knowledge and predilection was his father, who wanted to provide his first-born with an education sufficient to allow him to work at his side in the business as soon as possible.

Francis, then, was destined by his father's aspirations to take up the reins, at an opportune moment, of the family's large commercial enterprise. For sure, as is clear from the *Legenda trium sociorum*, the source closest to Assisi and to the city's affairs, Francis is presented as an active and able collaborator of his father and as an already trained merchant. We can reflect here a bit upon a point stressed in this connection, a point often downplayed if not completely ignored for reasons of a taste for romantic shading. The conversion of Francis was not that of a boy full of dreams who then embraced the love of Lady Poverty. In the Middle Ages, youths were ready for political, military, and business life much earlier than today. At the age of twenty, one was considered to be a developed man, with education already completed. Francis turned out to be such in his father's store, where he sold, dealt, and worked—seemingly—with full and total autonomy, but also in absolute family harmony.

2 *Conversion*

Francis, then, was not a youth lost in a dream world, but was a businessman who felt an even more conscious restlessness until he reached a complete upheaval of values. In the term that was technical in the Middle Ages and is now more generic in meaning, this upheaval is called conversion (*conversio*).

On this first and fundamental episode, on this decisive turn in the life of Francis, we have a testimony that is unpolished, spare, and concise, yet of incomparable value: his *Testament*. It is necessary to highlight from it everything that stands in contrast with what is told to us by the other sources that we accept as valid for our purposes. The *Testament*, setting down with lapidary simplicity his whole complex psychological evolution achieved through suffering, says:

> "This is how God inspired me to embark upon a life of penance. When I was in sin, the sight of lepers nauseated me beyond measure, but then God himself

led me into their company, and I had pity on them. When I had once become acquainted with them, what had previously nauseated me [literally, "was bitter to me"] became a source of spiritual and physical consolation [literally, "sweetness"] for me. After that I did not wait long before leaving the world."

This is clearly a short text, but it pinpoints the decisive moment, the determinant choice of a spiritual process that peaked in his upheaval of values. He declared this change in a concise manner by using a contrast between "bitter" and "sweet." The process culminated in the deed that caused this transformation, the *encounter with the lepers*. We should turn our attention now to these two points. We can begin by looking at how Francis assessed his life until his decisive change: "I was in sin." With these words an entire life from infancy to maturity is condemned in a global manner. At the same time, his life has been marked by a providential sign in which he recognizes himself, not to say identifies himself with it. Between his life of sin and life of penance he was given a sign of God's intervention that resulted in a decision to enter into a life that had already been ordained by God himself: the beginning of a life of penance.

There is, then, a definite connection between sin and the bitterness of the horror inspired by the lepers. Nor should we be surprised if a connection is drawn between sin (as the leprosy of the soul) and the lepers themselves. Sin as the soul's leprosy was an interpretation current in the spirituality of that time. The lepers were the sign of contradiction in the solitude of Francis' soul, which did not realize, by any self-reflection, that it too was leprous, no more or less than those who were leprous in body. Lepers thus horrified him, although he experienced no horror at that moral leprosy that rendered him equally repulsive within.

This fear and disgust, of which Providence made Francis clearly aware, is the consequence of a long tradition that passed from Judaism into Christianity and that was

manifested in many ways. Already in the Old Testament, and, more specifically, in the Books of Leviticus (13-14) and Deuteronomy (24:8-9), are indicated the methods to follow in order to recognize the disease. The Old Testament, it should be recalled, had its origin in the East, where leprosy always existed. Also listed are all the measures to take in order to keep the infected one out of human society, and other measures for deciding if and how to readmit him to the company of men. All these norms, accepted as well within the Christian community, had been applied among Christians systematically. One reason was that leprosy had passed from the East to the West, especially by returning crusaders along with the endemic lack of hygiene. Another reason was that malnutrition and lack of food led frequently to many skin diseases which, judged from external appearances, were like those indicated by the Bible and hence easily confused with leprosy. Thus a great number of the sick, excluded from society as lepers even though they were not, were ruthlessly pushed out and banned, surrounded by that aura of horror which Francis himself confesses in his *Testament*.

In addition, a series of juridical norms fell upon lepers. These norms varied from place to place but concurred in imposing a sort of civil death on top of the religious ban. These norms set the lepers' mandatory residences. Lucky were the communities that had a *hospitale leprosorium*, located, of course, outside the city walls and strictly isolated. The norms also prohibited lepers, as a rule, from entering the city. Passage through the towns was placed under restrictive measures: they had to avoid busy streets, and had to warn others of their presence by sounding bells or other instruments, or else warn them with their voices. Even more serious was the fact that lepers were ordinarily abandoned to their own devices. Even if some pious benefactor remembered them with a bequest, very few had the courage to bring them help. Even if help did come about, endless precautions were put into effect for fear of contagion and out of horror of the lepers.

This is the bitterness of which Francis spoke in his will.

From what we have observed so far, a consequence emerges that is no less relevant than the fact of his conversion and of the transformation in values that the conversion brought with it. This was the determinant and characteristic moment of the conversion itself: that of having cared for the lepers with mercy and with loving pity. At this point we have to recognize that the determinant factor—indicated as such by the saint—in that encounter was charity, instead of the horror that he first had felt toward lepers. This means that the central importance of Francis' conversion was not the concern for poverty, but, much more humanly profound and valid, for comprehension of the common human suffering of the soul—leprosy of the soul—and of the body. Thus the decisive importance of the conversion of Francis of Assisi consists of the passage from one human condition to another—the acceptance of his own place with those whom society had abandoned, the entrance into the midst of the excluded ones whose distinguishing mark was their rejection by everyone on account of their horrible condition. That poverty was also a characteristic of these excluded ones is a concurrent and unavoidable fact, but poverty as such was not the decisive factor of Francis' conversion.

Obviously, this does not mean that poverty had no weight or influence in Francis' spiritual history and in the importance of his conversion. It only serves to underline that at the moment of his conversion, the situation that provoked the decisive transformation, did not spring from the Christian and ascetic ideal of poverty. It sprang instead from a wellspring that at once was more profound and more meaningful on human and Christian levels. The question of poverty for some biographers has—or at least seems to have—a primary and in some respects a priority emphasis. It arises without doubt from a specific circumstance. In progressing from the intuition that culminated in the *conversio* over to the formation of a religious community, the aspect of poverty proceeded to

take on characteristics that distinguished the community from all precedents of a canonical and monastic sort. This progression was largely due to the magnitude of acceptance by marginal people of Francis' passage from his earlier life-style over to theirs. It then became necessary to specify, clarify, and determine these characteristics. They gradually took on normative force as institutions. As soon as the state of poverty acquired the importance and the uniqueness that later became permanent, in legislation affecting the Franciscan community, it became useful to seek out personal reasons in Francis that had led him to that type of poverty and not to another. The love, however, of Francis for the poor, his readiness to help them, his desire to be like them and among them, took its origin in part from his spontaneous, loving, and boundless generosity. These qualities also stemmed from the pity aroused in him by the fact of the poor being people at the margin of society, a fringe rejected by others, right on the same level and condition as the lepers.

The lepers thereafter—we mention it here with absolute clarity to avoid any confusion—always remained at the center both of primitive Franciscanism and of those who, even after the death of the saint, wanted to follow his example and to continue his tradition. It is enough to recall that during the saint's lifetime, while he was in Palestine, one of his brethren provoked serious disruptions within the order, still in process of formation, because he wanted to put the order at the service of lepers; we will have occasion later to bring this incident up again. Well-known, too, is the later episode concerning Blessed Angela of Foligno, who carried out her charitable and penitential work among lepers, to the point where she wanted to wash their wounds and then drink the filthy water filled with their grime. The decisive testimony, at any rate, remains that of Francis himself and of his *Testament.* Without any doubt, it is intentional in the rule that the rigor of poverty be stressed. Yet it is also intentional that, taken together with the story of his life as a follower of Christ, the time when he took pity on

the lepers be considered as the culminating moment of his conversion.

We thus find ourselves facing the first undisputed fact that indicates the complex interior richness of Francis. If we can, or indeed must, admire in him his simplicity of spirit, his serene intuition of the divine, we must always believe that we are also facing an exceptional soul.

In any event, it is perfectly in line with an understanding of religious psychology that, needing to leave his confreres with an image of himself, the saint chose, from his entire life, two elements as the first valid reality. The first element was being in sin, as the existential condition preceding the moment of *conversio*. The second element was conversion as a new birth, by the will of the Lord, since he began a new life in penance. And this new life, as a third element, begins with abandonment of the world, or rather, according to typical medieval terminology, of the *saeculum*.

Conversion, experienced as a new birth and accompanied by its characteristic action, is present in all those who in their own course of life experienced a transformation of values which is its distinguishing mark. (Even though conversion might or might not occur at a religious level, we are concerned here with the religious level.) Think of the famous episode of "*Tolle et lege*" in the garden of Milan that St. Augustine of Tagaste recounts in his *Confessions;* think of Paul on the road to Damascus; consider the play by Alessandro Manzoni where the wife, lost in the crowd, enters a church, prays, and regains her faith. These three episodes, each one different in its unfolding, all have a common thread which, in the mind of each one, remained alive and present throughout the decisive moment and the determinant factor that provoked it. Francis of Assisi joins their ranks because of his encounter with the lepers, after which the experience that at first was bitter for him—to see lepers—was converted into "sweetness of mind and of body."

This conversion, which Francis talks about in his clear and meaningful way, remains, nonetheless—because of its slow, gradual ripening and development—a reality

enclosed in the silence of a conscience, and we cannot trace its origins. How did the young merchant come to such a transformation of his existence? Through what interior travail did he decide to pass from his condition as a rich man, favored by fortune and destined for a brilliant future, to the condition of an outcast, of a voluntary penitent, in order to be closer to those whom all of society had rejected?

Francis must have been silent about this spiritual unfolding, and about the phases of his evolution, since no one presumes to speak of disclosures by him in this area. It is worth recalling that all his biographers wrote their works after the *Testament*, after the saint's death, after the formation of the order, and after emphasis had been placed upon the importance of poverty in Francis' life. They had access only to external facts and to separate episodes of his life. The validity of their material has to be tested now and then, in an attempt to clarify for us their usefulness toward the purposes, if possible, of an eventual better comprehension of his *conversio*.

The problem's importance surely did not escape the biographers, nor did they escape the subtle temptation to give it their own explanation. Precisely for this reason we will not attempt to give still another explanation; we would rather present only the circumstances that help us to better understand the conversion of Francis as it happened.

There is, then, a first problem to deal with: Francis, as we have seen, defined his condition of life in just four words: "*cum essem in peccatis.*" Thus, the man, looking backward on half of his life, saw one uniform condition, nothing but sin. What, then, were these sins? Is it possible to know more about them? We will promptly put aside the *Lives* by Thomas of Celano, not because they are mendacious or wrong, but because the first *Life* is inclined to give a portrayal in strongly contrasting colors of Francis' conversion. It presents us with a youth, debauched and corrupted, even an outright corruptor himself owing to his money and his personal charm, badly educated by a

family that was basically to blame for the grave consequences that ensued. The second *Vita* brings some attenuation and correction to this portrayal but, in essence, only with regard to the two parents and the family, certainly without changing the effect of the whole. It is indeed striking that so many historians did not take into account the comments of some writers, beginning with Nino Tamassia and followed by Walter Goetz and others after them. This group understood Thomas' intention not only to give a portrayal certainly of Francis, but also a reprimand to thoughtless parents and an exaltation of the infinite divine goodness that is able to bring forth from a reprobate a saint like Francis. Certainly we do not reject out of hand the indications that could come to us from Thomas. One does not forget, however, that he tends to create portraits with literary construction, following the teaching of the rhetorical techniques of that period. The portraits were retouched to meet the needs of the life of the order and for the exaltation of Gregory IX, the saint's friend. Yet Thomas certainly was not a falsifier or a liar, particularly since Francis' youth holds interest because of the story of a prodigious divine intervention; it is not a useful account, however, of life among the friars nor of the intercession of the cardinal protector during Francis' lifetime.

Besides Thomas of Celano, the work called *Legenda trium sociorum*, the *Legend of the Three Companions*, is fundamental. The book brings us the echo—whether direct or mediated is hard to tell, as we noted earlier—of a person or persons able to watch Francis during his years in Assisi. It has a sense for images of daily city reality; one notices the concreteness of human relations that can only stem from someone describing what he directly knows, with the awareness also that his account will be checked by people in a position to correct it and to counteract any attempt to modify the reality in any way. The very fact that it is limited to events in Assisi alone, that it omits whatever does not relate to Assisi, underlines the importance of it. This is true as well for other elements, no

less significant, such as those concerning the city's inhabitants who mocked the saint or who—while he lay dying—monitored his slow agony, fearing that his body, destined to become a precious relic, might somehow be carried away from their midst.

What do we gain, then, from these works? Do they help us understand the secret of Francis' conversion? In reality, the secret remains intact: we can only better locate Francis in his city and his time. The somber presentation of the first *Vita* by Thomas of Celano, tacitly superseded by the second one, is without any doubt less valid than that which emerges from the *Legend of the Three Companions*. There the young son of Pietro Bernardone is shown as a true and capable aide to his father in his prosperous shop, a storehouse of cloth of great value into which moneyed customers streamed, ready to pay well for precious fabrics. But, then, what of the sins of which Francis declares himself guilty in the *Testament*? Let us begin by pointing out that by the expression *esse in peccatis* he did not intend to specify certain faults as opposed to others. Rather, he was speaking of a life attached to the pleasures and rewards of the world, a life that did not explicitly ignore Christ but nevertheless functioned as if he had never existed. It was a condition of existence that moralists of that period considered and deplored as normal for the masses. The moralists repeatedly protested this attitude by proclaiming the possibility of imminent death and the universal and particular judgments. Examples are seen in the *Dies irae* and in the initial part of the *Vita prima* by Thomas of Celano, completely dominated by this motif.

Against this background, how did Francis fit? Indications are provided above all by the *Legend of the Three Companions*, which more than any other source seems to reflect the social reality and environment of Assisi, and to display an awareness of details relating to the saint's family and economic activity. It is considered even more trustworthy inasmuch as it gives us facts that are, as it were, neutral and that do not appear to have any specific purpose either hortatory or hagiographic. Rather, it

re-echoes the public knowledge that had remained about him in the city.

This legend very correctly points out that Francis was *adultus* and competent in carrying out his father's art, *negociacio*, trading. It immediately adds a detail of character that we can without question consider to be valid, particularly given the result of the series of events that followed. The merchant was successful like his father, but differed from him in one character trait: he was merrier and more generous, "given over to pranks and song, moving around the city of Assisi day and night, joining up with others like himself, free-spending to the point of consuming in dinners and other things everything he was able to own and earn." His family—notes the *Legend*, thus helping us to understand the polemic attitude of the first *Vita* by Thomas of Celano in the book's beginning—often reproached him because he behaved not like their son, but "like a great prince." Yet the parents—not only his mother, we might note—were rich and "loved him with every tenderness" (*tenervine*) and in these matters they let him be, not wishing to trouble him." His mother, then, as mentioned, defended him from neighbors' criticism when they commented negatively on the son's prodigality. Indeed, according to the legend, he put on clothes of distinctly finer quality than what was customary for his station, and even manifested in his elegance a marked tone of singularity. For example, he had a fine cloth sewn onto one of cheapest price, striving for what our current language would call contrast, and succeeded in attracting attention.

Even more worthy of attention in the *Legend of the Three Companions* is the depth of this psychological characterization: Francis was "*naturaliter curialis in moribus et verbis.*" These are words that clearly and unmistakably designate a behavior that was second nature for the young merchant. The term *curialis* is, in fact, the Latin translation in Europe, and especially in Italy, of "courtly" (*cortese*). That means, then, that Francis was naturally inclined to a courtly affectation already mentioned as characteristic of a certain

kind of Western civilization. The *Legend* also stresses how much this factor contrasted with the mentality of a merchant of the old style.

This "courtliness" required appropriate comportment that eschewed all common vulgarity, demanding instead impeccable rigor and finesse. In the *Legend* we read that Francis avoided every offensive or coarse word. While still young and fun-loving, he had decided to ignore every utterance addressed to him that had any vulgar element. There was, however, in him—and we are still referring to a natural attitude—something not affected but certainly characteristic and specific: if generosity toward whoever needed it was a component of courtliness, in him it was deeply, intensely, and spiritually motivated. The generosity of God was to be matched, by anyone in a position to do so, with no less a level of generosity toward the poor. The legend is not without an occasional remark that, even in offering a rather banal example, demonstrates a sharp power of observation. It is worthwhile to bring out its importance: "Although Francis was a merchant, he was surely a boastful disperser of earthly wealth," but also shared in the mentality of his trade. When "out of greed for riches and involvement in trade" he refused an alms to a pauper, he repented of it afterward as being a serious breach of courtliness: he had committed, as it were, a *magna rusticitas* [a very rude action], yet another specific term designating just the opposite of *curialitas*, i.e., of courtliness.

Having examined cautiously other historical texts, we do not feel ready to swear by all the particulars referred to by the *Legend of the Three Companions*. Yet we reiterate that it gives the impression that its account stands as the echo of common opinion that records certain characteristics without any hortatory, religious, or didactic meaning. Yet its data coincide fully with what other sources speak of concerning a way of life broadly documented and thus absolutely credible. Along its essential lines, then, its account is valid for the historian.

At most, out of a scruple for exactness and in order not

to distract from the necessary accuracy of this whole picture, one can recall that this way of life was in some way ahead of its time in a center like Assisi. This courtly culture within the Italian bourgeoisie is already present at the end of the twelfth century and in the earlier years of the thirteenth. It matured, however, in the decades immediately following.

A somber contrast exists between the Francis so precisely inserted into a civil community that accepted him and remembered him in his most meaningful life events, and the same Francis presented by Thomas of Celano. Without repeating here what has already been noted, it will suffice to point out the moralistic sermon against those parents—including the saint's, needless to say—who educate their children for evil right from the cradle, even forcing them to commit evil when they are barely adolescents. Then, little by little as they grow, they are led astray by sin, causing them to behave even worse, giving them only the name of Christians. It even gets to the point where they pretend to have committed graver sins in order to make themselves look better with their peers.

Those who want to defend to the last the historical validity of the two editions of the *Vita* by Thomas correctly note that the discourse on bad education does not refer in every detail to Francis. Yet it remains true that the biographer, right after this discourse, states: "Such are the wretched basic teachings (*rudimenta*) by which this man, whom we now venerate as a saint since he really is one, lived from his earliest age almost to his twenty-fifth year for himself and miserably wasted his time." He sharpens the judgment by adding, "Moreover, he was, beyond his other peers plunging badly into vanities, an inciter to evil and a follower of foolishness to a greatly excessive extent." He then lists a series of faults and vices, more-or-less generic, among echoes both biblical and Augustinian—obviously from St. Augustine's *Confessions*—that ends by speaking of the intervention of the hand of God upon this young man. Satan was drawing him into

his snares, aided by the ardors of youth, with the cleverness of the ancient serpent. In rapid synthesis, this is the discourse delivered by Thomas in the first *Vita*; to it the second adds practically nothing except for some external touches and a generic homage to the mother. By way of conclusion, we can say then that this part of each *Vita* is nothing else but a moralistic amplification, conducted along the most customary lines of medieval rhetoric, of the words from the *Testament*: "*Cum essem in peccatis*," with nothing that manages to give a historically valid profile of Francis prior to his conversion.

Francis was, then, a young merchant but capable in business, lover of pomp and luxury, given over to a demeanor that let him shine for his generosity, liberality of means, elegance, and "courtliness." His was the ambitious aspiration to come out ahead, to be above others. He thought he could do it with his wealth and with whatever wealth could give him, looking to a future of prosperity and grandeur.

Once again in perfect consonance with the historical situation of the period, the *Legend of the Three Companions* provides us with significant evidence of a specific social condition, in a series of chronological dates that appear substantially correct. The *economic* condition of Francis' family and that of Francis himself were such that he differed from the nobility only on the *social* level, owing to the clear distinction, existing at the time, among the three *ordines* into which society itself was divided. It was a distinction that, at least in the Italian communes, tended to waver and even to blur, inasmuch as the rich bourgeois ended up having a standard of living identical and often superior to that of the nobility, given the diverse financial resources. This means that the knightly ambitions of the young merchant had concrete possibilities of becoming true; the very *Legend of the Three Companions* gives, in this connection, some points of information that are once again of noteworthy importance. They give witness to a widespread and common remembrance about the saint's youth, dealing with details and specifics that by their

very nature were able to be known by the public: they were facts that occurred and were observed by many and sometimes by all. One of these particulars involves Francis' taking part in the battle of Collestrada in 1202, when he was twenty, another was his imprisonment in Perugia for more than a year.

We know nothing about the young merchant's involvement in the political life of Assisi. At that time it was rather troubled by the contrast between *maiores* and *minores*, between the nobility and the people and, at the same time, by the enmity between Assisi and Perugia. All this occurred while Innocent III was pursuing his policy of *recuperationes*, i.e., the gaining of what belonged to the Church as a consequence of donations from various sovereigns made to the Church over many centuries. These donations had remained theoretical for the most part. The man who desired to get ahead by "courtliness" in all probability felt great revulsion over the explosion of enmities, of hostile feelings, of vendettas. This illustrates Francis' desire for peace, and the supreme value he placed on it later. He looked upon peace as the indispensable premise for Christian fellowship among people of whatever social class or economic condition.

At Collestrada, Francis fought and was taken prisoner. He was confined among nobles, because "he was noble in his comportment" (*nobilis erat moribus*). This expression in the *Legend* means that his economic condition had allowed him to fight on horseback among the *milites*, i.e., among the knights, who normally came out of the nobility. It is no less significant that all of the sources that speak of this imprisonment make no mention of any discrimination on the part of the real nobles toward Francis. He is said to have been ever cheerful and joking, giving encouragement to the others, affirming and retelling his dreams of glory. Yet he was also making peace among all. He dealt cordially with one of the prisoners who was offensive and who, consequently, had been abandoned by the others and had been left in complete solitude.

Freed in 1203 or 1204, Francis returned to Assisi, to his

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accustomed life, to his unfulfilled ambitions, to his generosity. Some nobleman about whom we know nothing else, seems to have offered him an extraordinary opportunity: the nobleman was looking for companions for a journey to Apulia under the command of Count Gentile. Francis had the feeling that his hour had arrived and tried to cultivate the man's good will by offering him high-quality cloths, so as to be able to join the expedition that the count was forming.

The person of this Count Gentile escapes all research, at least given the status of current documentation. However, his expedition can be located in a specific and concrete historical reality. It is known that a conflict was developing in Germany between Philip of Swabia, son of Barbarossa, and Otto of Brunswick, son of Henry the Lion, over the succession to the imperial throne. At the same time, the boy Frederick Roger—the then name of the future Frederick II—remained king of Sicily without forces of his own. He also had no one to support him except for his distant tutor, Pope Innocent III. It seems that the pope was rather well disposed toward him and was attentive to keeping track of the difficult and painful events of his life, as reported to him by the archbishop of Capua, Rainaldo di Celano. The pope also relied upon the news that filtered out of the intricate and confused situation on the island of Sicily. And yet, in the pontiff's careful and exact judgment, the reality of southern Italy came across as even more intricate and confused, apparently on the path to real and irremediable anarchy. The worry that this state of affairs caused was enough to lead the pope to seek to bring about a minimum of order with the help of a relative and through the ambition of local lords like the count of Aquin.

The pope thought then of availing himself of the ambitions of a man of arms, a mercenary captain, Walter of Brienne, from a turbulent French family, who had married Alberia, daughter of Tancredi of Lecce. Walter wanted to take hold of the great fiefs in Apulia, a distant and rugged land, which, in his judgment, belonged to his wife.

An expedition right into Apulia, at the behest of the pope who was also the country's high feudal lord, seemed to Walter to be a favorable chance. He made his preparations, assembling around himself as many others, whether Italian or not, who wanted to take part in the expedition. Among these was Count Gentile, with whom Francis chose to go.

Within this mood of chivalric excitement an episode occurred, as recounted by the *Legend of the Three Companions*, of courtly generosity which the young merchant felt stirring within him and which inspired so many of his deeds. After having purchased for the expedition a whole rich outfit of arms "that was expensive and unique," he gave it away to another *miles*. This youth, to judge from the story, also wanted to join with the noble of Assisi but could not, since he lacked the money to buy the necessary equipment. Francis managed immediately to buy another set for himself without any difficulty. Yet out of this incident a beautiful dream came to him at night. Upon hearing his name called by someone, the young man was ushered into the splendid palace of a beautiful bride; it was filled with shining shields and other arms. Dumbfounded, he asked who was the master of the palace and of all it contained. He heard the answer that it was he himself.

The *Legend of the Three Companions* does not hesitate to attribute this dream directly to the gift of arms made to the poor knight and to the excitement over the imminent departure for Apulia. Yet it also tends to see in the dream the first form of divine intervention as a vision that drew him on, "desirous as he was for glory, with all its splendor."

We first begin to see something different in Francis' life when we see him in his twenty-third year. Yet the line of his interior development is unquestionably coherent: the rich merchant aspiring to become noble appears frequently in Italian life during these centuries and years. Francis' ambition stands out and has a specific characteristic only in the fact that becomes evident later in his change of values, in his *conversio*; it will not be a rejection of ambition, but rather an inversion of its content and its ends.

We have spoken of this interior development as following upon the line described by the *Legend of the Three Companions*. Let us bear in mind that they had read the first *Vita* by Thomas of Celano and that where they differed, they did so consciously in order to correct him (the corrections were in part incorporated into the second *Vita* by Thomas himself). Now, this interior development had a precise historical value. All the sources, however, concur in mentioning the knightly ambition of Francis, the dream of the house filled with arms, the expedition into Apulia. From the *Legend* Thomas drew for his second *Vita* the facts, new to him, of the battle of Collestrada, of the imprisonment, of the gift to the poor knight; the gift, with his taste as a writer and hagiographer, he transformed into a deed of religious piety. He was looking to the model of St. Martin of Tours as described by Sulpicius Severus, trying directly to establish a parallel between the two saints. He complicated it all with antitheses and plays on words that are of literary interest, but are completely useless to the historian. The dream itself is modified slightly in this second *Vita*, but in a way that makes possible symbolic developments: the bride's palace full of arms becomes a palace full of arms, as well as a bride.

All agree as well in *emphasizing* that Francis did set out—we do not know precisely the year or the month—but that a short distance away, perhaps one or two days' travel, in the area around Spoleto, he felt unwell and was invited in a dream—to be exact, divinely invited—to return home to his destiny. In reality the source, namely, Thomas of Celano, which tends most to present these events as providential interventions, tells us that Francis returned to his normal life as a "courtly" youth. He also tells us about his friends' festive welcome for him: they sought him as the king of the banquet, particularly since, being rich, he paid the bills. After the banquet there was singing and shouting throughout the city; Francis, however, as a true lord following his cortege, moved in silence. His companions were surprised by his unaccustomed silence. As peers will do, they asked him if he was thinking about

a wife. The response was in jest no less than the question, although the biographers draw a symbolic meaning out of it: "Of course, you are right. I was thinking of taking the noblest, richest, and most beautiful wife that there is." And all amused themselves by teasing him.

The *Legend of the Three Companions* gives us the most certain external stages of this spiritual evolution, certain visible events. The *Legend* observes that, after this solemn feast, Francis began to appear even more in the grip of a profound inner crisis. We will never know its deep wellsprings, because there exist no confidences from him to anyone on the matter. The sources remain, then, closed off in the silence of a conscience, about which we know only that it became even more restless, full of uncertainties, of vacillation, of perplexity, until the decisive event arrived, the fact that determined the break from his former way of life: his conversion.

It is difficult if not impossible to isolate Francis' motives during this period, nor can we give any precise set of dates for its duration. One can try to trace his motives back to the disappointment over his aborted expedition to Apulia, or to the illness that felled him on the journey or to some personal motive, or to dissatisfaction between normal, banal daily life and the lofty reaches of his dream ideals. But this would mean yielding to plausible or even probable hypotheses, yet without the least shred of documentary support. There is no choice, then, except to look into what Francis did during this phase of interior transformation for signs, if they exist, of an emerging transformation. From the mass of information at our disposal, the new and distinct trait seems to be the passage from a *courtly* generosity and liberality, practiced to demonstrate one's own nobility of soul, over to a *merciful* generosity, intended for the aid of the poor and the needy. This was done not without some gesture that indicated Francis' psychological direction in the years to come. One time, when he had nothing else to give, he took off his own shirt. Another time, alone at home with his mother while his father was away, he had a great number of

loaves of bread baked for distribution to the poor. His mother herself would be taken as witness to this deed, if it were not for the fact that the words attributed to her make us think that they are a copy—which does not necessarily mean they are false—of the passage in the Gospel of Luke that brings out that Mary, observing all those things, remembered them and kept them in her heart. Nor can we fail to point out that Francis did all this when his father wasn't there. In this detail we can already discern the beginning of that dissension that would lead to the deep rift between the two, up until the judgment before the bishop of Assisi.

The most evident sign of the change in Francis, who was among the most brilliant young men of the city and one of its most prominent merchants, was, without doubt, his pilgrimage to St. Peter's in Rome with the circumstances that marked it. It was a series of actions, still external, uncertain probes rather than decisions: for example, the ample offering he made to the Prince of the apostles, disdainful of others' small donations; his wearing of a poor man's garments and begging for alms in French—out of shame? for novelty? as original behavior?—while the *Legend of the Three Companions* informs us that "he gladly spoke in the French language, although he was not able to speak it correctly." He finally put his own clothes back on, thus reducing greatly the spiritual value of his deed—it ended up staying within the limits of hesitation and perplexity, limits of which we have already spoken. To this period of uncertainty there also belongs, apparently, the help that he gave to priests for their needs.

In any event his attention, not to say his adherence, to poverty must have matured. His biographers speak of it. According to the *Legend* alone, Francis sought counsel about it from the bishop of the city; in reporting this, the *Legend* is perhaps rendering homage to Bishop Guido, who always remained on good terms with the saint. He survived Francis by two years, dying in 1228. A resolution was slow in coming, until—according to the *Legend*—

he discerned from prayer, as from divine inspiration, that he had to achieve a complete reordering of his value judgments. "Francis," an interior voice might have said, "all those things you have casually loved and have desired to own, you must now disdain and hate, if you want to learn my will. After you have begun with that, the things that used to seem fine and sweet to you will be unbearable and bitter, and the things that used to fill you with horror will fill you with great sweetness and immense delight."

Soon, while riding in the area around Assisi, he encountered a leper. The sources agree in stating that Francis shared in the horror of his time over lepers. The *Legend of the Three Companions* and Thomas of Celano also make the point—and there is no reason not to believe it—that he not only felt horror at the sight of them, but he also felt such disgust at smelling their stink as to pinch his nostrils closed with his fingers. This time, however, "forcing himself," he got off his horse and gave the leper a coin, kissing his hand. He accepted the kiss of peace from him, mounted his horse again and continued on his way. Some days later he took a pile of money to the lepers' hospital in order to give them financial aid, kissing each on the hand. This was the decisive moment of his conversion; the *Legend of the Three Companions* and Thomas of Celano agree on this point, although Thomas failed to bring out the supernatural aspect of the encounter with the first leper. When Francis climbed back upon his horse, he saw no trace of the poor man to whom he had given the alms and a kiss.

The spiritual itinerary of this conversion appears differently in the first *Vita* by Thomas, where he gives much more importance to the elements of poverty and of care for the needy, rather than to the lepers. He thus presents his account in a way that is distinct from what is found in his own second *Vita* and in the *Legend of the Three Companions*. We therefore find ourselves faced with the situation we mentioned earlier, namely, the intention of stressing the characteristic of poverty, which is surely most important for the Friars Minor but is not determinant

and decisive in the specific event of Francis' conversion.

On this point the sources—offering as they do the historically most valid data for reconstructing solely and as far as possible this principal event of his life—confirm what the *Testament* summarily but effectively tells us. With absolute clarity, Francis made a definite choice: he was no longer a rich merchant, but a reject among rejects. He was a leper among lepers, a pauper among the poor, a derelict among derelicts. He had just made the decisive step, the abandonment of the world in which he lived, even though he continued to be part of it as a physical person. After his choice came the problem of how to put it into action. Medieval society did not make Francis' decision easy, with its rather rigid institutional structures and its tendency to determine and classify everything. In the end he did not hesitate: "*Paulo steti et exivi de Seculo.*"

Again we have a statement from the saint's pen that is at once technically precise and semantically polivalent. It means, first of all, that his *conversio*, from just the psychological aspect, changed him radically. This change occurred even though he maintained on an external level his previous status as the son of a merchant and a merchant himself, although with some change even there. He thus withdrew from lay society, from the *ordo laicorum*, in the canonical sense, in order to become a penitent. The Church had recognized this category as one under her jurisdiction, even if the individuals were not clerics. Francis reached the point of making his choice, but only as an option brought to a formal level. Being a man of penance did not yet have a clear content or norm. The penitential condition was not, in fact, aligned more with one way of life than another: it was simply a withdrawal from or abandonment of the world in which one had first lived. However, it involved no specific pattern of action. And pattern is what Francis was looking for.

His first effort was to withdraw to a cave where he spent the time in prayer. A friend, whose identity is unknown to us and who soon disappeared from the saint's life, joined him often. During this period he was not free from

temptations. One was that he might end up crippled and twisted like a woman well-known throughout Assisi because of a deformity that filled everyone with dread and horror. Nor did he lack for anxieties and worries. Even though he had been able to renounce his sinful past, would he be able to avoid a return to evil in the future? This anxiety stemmed from the fact that he still lived in his city. He was not concealing his new life and was a source of doubt and confusion to others. He had not gone to Apulia, he stated (among other things), but even in his own country he had accomplished great deeds. He also reaffirmed, now giving symbolic meaning to his words, when anyone asked him about his taking a wife, that he was preparing to marry the most beautiful, the richest, and the most noble woman there was.

In this state of spiritual restlessness there occurred his experience with the crucifix at San Damiano. This was his first encounter in a truly mystical dimension. He was wandering outside of the city when he happened to pass in front of the church of San Damiano, which still stands. He entered to pray. The crucifix in the church then spoke to him: "Do you not see, Francis, that my house is crumbling? Go, then, and repair it for me." Francis understood these words in their literal sense, since the building was obviously dilapidated. Leaving the church, he found the priest in charge and gave him money to keep a lamp lit in front of the crucifix, promising to give him more as it was needed.

The account that we have followed here, taken entirely from the *Legend of the Three Companions*, is very important historically. It signals a second stage in Francis' transformation, in which the meaning of his conversion is completed and deepened, tracing a clearer and more precise direction in his spiritual journey. His instinctive and generous choice on impulse had moved him to leave his own world in order to pass over to the lepers' side. This choice found its justification in what we could call his encounter with the crucifix. "In his soul," relates the *Legend*, "he truly felt that it was Christ crucified that had

spoken to him." His conversion was centered upon Christ on the cross. In him Francis felt that the deepest and truest root of his choice was touched and made real. The suffering of Christ explained, illuminated, and justified all human suffering. People, however, with all their penance, could never by themselves have attained the value of the suffering of the Crucified. The reality of Francis' conversion fell in this way within the context and sphere of the suffering Christ. It shifted from being an individual and personal matter, even a private one, over to a single unifying moment of a reality that greatly transcended any one person. It became an effective sign for all those who, like Francis himself, wanted to abandon their sinful way of life in order to join themselves to Christ and in Christ. His conversion acted as a sign as well for those who were not on the cross but who still suffered from misery, pain, rejection, and abandonment.

The crucifix at San Damiano made Francis aware of the suffering of Christ as a superhuman value in the reality of human existence. It was the only power able to give meaning and sense to human suffering, to the point of attracting people to seek this suffering and to accept it freely in order to come closer to Christ. The saint's religious severity had its origin in his insight into the meaning of the crucifixion of Christ. Its theological meaning was not what impressed him, but rather its power of example for each individual and for all who wanted truly to call themselves Christians.

Francis immediately acted upon this deepening of his own choice and conversion by making some practical decisions toward the material reconstruction of San Damiano. He selected cloths of various colors from his father's shop. Then, not being able to sell them under his father's nose, he went instead to Foligno. Returning with cash, he immediately brought it to the priest of the ruined church. The priest did not want to accept the money. Either he felt he could not trust Francis for fear of a prank—up until a short time before, had Francis not been the king of Assisi's party goers, good at song, but also at jokes?—or

else he feared the father's wrath. Francis gained his permission to stay in the church to pray a while. Afterward, he threw the money inside through a window.

The sale of cloth at Foligno and his change of outward manner could not escape anyone's attention, since his abandonment of his work as a merchant was already known to everyone. All this disturbed Pietro Bernardone, and he began to search for his son. According to the tradition reflected in the *Legend of the Three Companions*, Francis hid himself for a whole month in a room that he had prepared for this eventuality. It was known only to one other person from his house, someone who would bring him his food. He finally put aside all hesitation and returned to Assisi. Everyone greeted him with mockery, insults, and tricks, as if he were some kind of fool. Then word of his humiliating entry into the city reached his father at the shop. The news wounded Pietro's pride. In his avarice, he was also upset over the cloths and money that his son had taken from home and had sold or given away.

The version of this incident that we find in the first *Vita* by Thomas of Celano (but not in the second) is more dramatic in many places and yet agrees in substance with the *Legend*. Yet it also leaves the impression that the harshest details mentioned by it arose from a desire once again for literary embellishment. By this account, Francis is supposed to have withdrawn to a hiding place not outside of the city but right within his own house. Here as well he was aided by a domestic. When he came out and walked through Assisi amid the insults of the crowd, his father caught up with him, took him into custody and locked him in some dark place in order to break his will with rebukes and whippings. He stayed there until his mother freed him. For her trouble she brought upon herself her husband's rage and blame.

No one has plumbed the depths of his pain in this experience nor told us about it, since Francis himself never talked about it. In reality, this experience must have truly been his trial by fire, but it must also have enabled

him to realize that his choice was at last definitive, and that any turning back was forever impossible.

We come now to the concluding episode of Francis' withdrawal from the world. All his biographers recount it with more-or-less lofty words as a victorious battle of the *miles Christi*, the soldier of Christ, of Francis himself against his enemy, against the world. Taking his son before the tribunal was the father's final attempt to break the son's will. He used means as old as the world but as useless as ever: depriving him of money and of everything else that he owned.

The more accurate tradition in this episode is that of the *Legend of the Three Companions*. The reason is Thomas, obviously more literate, was by birth a citizen of the kingdom of Sicily and was probably less knowledgeable about the juridical practice of a communal city such as Assisi. For one thing, he states that the father dragged the son to face the bishop immediately.

In reality, as the *Legend* correctly describes it, the judicial process was more complex than that. Its record allows us to determine the status that Francis already had in the juridical and ecclesiastical order. Pietro Bernardone, in his anger, without observing amenities of any kind, took his son before the city's consuls: they were the city's collegial magistrature holding all public powers, including judicial. The consuls, however, wanted nothing to do with the case. It seems that the recently elected Bishop Guido was a stubborn and firm defender of the *libertas ecclesiae*, of the Church's autonomy within the city. This included the right for anyone who had embraced religious life, even a mere penitent, to be judged by a church court. Indeed, the response the consuls gave Pietro is extremely significant: "From the moment he entered God's service, he removed himself from our jurisdiction." This establishes with great clarity and with otherwise unmistakable certainty that "public fame," the importance of which we discussed earlier, could regard Francis as a fool because of the choice and the decision he had made; still, it also maintained that he was in a juridical situation—namely,

the service of God—that took him out of lay consular jurisdiction and into church episcopal jurisdiction. Pietro Bernardone, in his stubborn anger (let us try to understand him: in his mind, his favorite son, designated to succeed him, was betraying him!) had Francis brought before the bishop.

The course of the trial, again following the *Legend of the Three Companions*, followed the procedural norms provided for the case. It states that a messenger was sent in the correct way to deliver officially to Francis the order to appear for judgment. Francis obeyed and came into the bishop's presence. The bishop invited Francis to hand over to his father whatever of his money he still had. He also urged him to trust in Divine Providence in the future. Without hesitation, the young man declared himself ready to do it, and would even include the clothing. He then withdrew into a room, stripped himself totally, and went out again—the trial appears to have taken place in what today is called Piazza di San Rufino—carrying his clothing with the money on top. Then, after setting everything down in front of his father, the bishop, and all assembled (the trial seems to have attracted quite a crowd) he uttered this solemn statement, the essence of which has undoubtedly reached us: "Listen to me, all of you, and understand me. Up until now I have called Pietro Bernardone my father. Yet, since I have resolved to serve God, I am returning to Pietro Bernardone the money he was worried about and all the clothing I had from his stores. From now on, I want to say, 'Our Father, who art in heaven,' and not 'father Pietro Bernardone.'" His father took the goods and went off. Those present, moved by one of those rapid shifts that were not rare in medieval crowds, gathered around Francis. More directly, the bishop took him in his arms, wrapped him in his mantle, and gave him from then on the comfort of his advice and help.

The dramatic intensity of this episode has been stressed many times, and rightly so. Francis' rebuff of Pietro Bernardone as his father and his full and absolute

acknowledgment of God as his own father as well as father of all is taken, however, and plumbed in all its intense spiritual significance, beyond its unquestionable and specific juridical value. His supreme choice matured slowly and, clarified by his kiss for the leper, was to move from one part of society to another—from the part that had an orderly family and social system over to the other of the poor, the derelicts, the abandoned. With this renunciation, his choice achieved its ultimate and definitive consummation. It was no accident that his renunciation did not take place within the closed circle of his family. Rather, it was public and solemn, sealed—and the importance of the deed was always important in medieval life—by his stripping himself and giving back the clothing and money to the one he no longer acknowledged as his father.

This deed, while it undoubtedly had its juridical and social meaning, also expressed an ecclesiastical and spiritual meaning that was no less relevant. Nakedness was one of the forms of humiliation canonically provided for in public penance. By despoiling himself of the garments in which so often he had sung, danced, played, and shared with his friends in worldly distractions, Francis was repudiating his entire past and was unmistakably displaying his penitential intentions. His penance, specifically through and with his nakedness, was taking the most rigorous form of the *sequela Christi* [the following of Christ]: it was the goal of following the example of Jesus in its ancient and severe tradition of *nudus nudum Christum sequi* [being naked to follow the naked Christ], the watchword coined in his time by St. Jerome. It recurred regularly throughout the Middle Ages as the designation for the highest and most rigorous form of asceticism.

Up until a short time before, Francis had been a merchant. His greatest concern had been to make deals with an eye to future gain, by avoiding all risk of loss or damage, to the point of resorting to illicit and blameworthy acts such as usurious loans. Now, however, his

renunciation of everything he owned extended even to any possible inheritance, implicitly included in his rebuff of Pietro Bernardone as his father. For him, the renunciation meant that he was taking on the condition of one who receives what is necessary for living on a daily basis, getting up in the morning without knowing if, how, or when he might find something to satisfy his hunger. It was, then, an act of total seriousness and commitment. Besides the switch into another social order, it brought on economic consequences that were difficult, painful, and, on top of everything else, irreversible.

Still, one must at this juncture grant that Francis never lost sight of a point that only apparently was of little importance. His renunciation, and thus the condition that proceeded from it, since it was all voluntary, was also meritorious. It was a source of advantage before God and before man. He was fully aware of this from the first moments that followed his act of renunciation. This is shown by one episode that all the biographers mention and that thus is very credible. Its credibility is also confirmed by its reference to a frequent and subtle cruelty in the style of those times. It was very cold. Francis was dressed in some poor rags and was obviously suffering. His brother ran into him and said ironically to a passerby that he would buy from Francis a *nummata* of sweat, the amount of merchandise—in this case, of sweat—that could be had for a coin of small value. Francis' reply came quickly and decisively, just as the offer was made mockingly: "I will sell it to God, who will be able to pay me a good price for it."

This awareness of having chosen a condition of utter misery and rejection, and yet a condition that he could have voluntarily assumed or not, tormented the saint until the last years of his life. The *socii* [companions] who attended him in his illness and pain give repeated witness to his feeling of grief over the fact that he had not been born poor and had not experienced misery and hunger as his real condition. Through his spontaneous and instinctive reflection in conscience, more than through any

sort of theological or moralistic knowledge, Francis examined the different forms of poverty in all their ramifications, including psychological. We find these forms studied by various authors of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries on the level of social and psychological analysis. They attempted to study a phenomenon that was seen more and more frequently and that was spreading under many varied manifestations and at all levels. Voluntary poverty had multiple expressions in the world of that time, and the Church had a variety of means to further it with her instruments of assistance. To limit ourselves to one author among them all, it is enough to recall Raoul Ardens, a subtle theologian and moralist. In his *Speculum Universale* he sets out an exposition of everything concerning poverty with exceptional penetration and finesse.

Francis' definitive withdrawal from the world, then, came after the renunciation of his father, of his social condition, of his possessions, and after his total liberation from the world. Yet it was not the conclusion or terminal moment of his spiritual journey, despite the seriousness of his deed. Having chosen the way of penance and having exercised his decisive choice, he did not have to lock himself into a situation of spiritual commitment that would remain immobile and, at least outwardly, sterile. He had to give it a content, and thus mark out his personal position even in regard to everything that had led up to it. Although he had left the world, Francis did not want to leave Christian society or the brotherhood of all men in Christ, but wanted to work within it. He had to find the proper path among all the possibilities.

IV

Living According to the Pattern of the Gospel

1 In search of Christ

Francis' choice now more than ever had to be concretized in a practical way in some specific form of life. He certainly knew, however confusedly and vaguely, how agitated the world of religion was in his time. Not only was lay religious practice affected but monastic and clerical life were also finding different expressions.

Toward the priestly hierarchy, and toward priests individually, his attitude was indisputably clear. The *Testament* stands out as an unmistakable witness of this. He was no longer a youngster; and after his fundamental choice, which we have attempted to explain in depth, he did not at all want to become a cleric or a priest. That would have entailed his entrance into a social group that was well ordered, well normalized, well protected. He would have been regaining, at least in large measure, just what he had chosen to give up. He had not renounced his father, his business, his secure work, his social rank, only to gain another position that was still more prestigious and no less secure. His purpose was to assume the part of one who was nothing and had nothing. This was why he renounced even the possibility of accepting the dignity of the priesthood. At the same time, he did not intend contempt or rejection of the clergy, as we shall see more

clearly later on.

He was no less respectful toward monastic life. The documentation for this is not abundant, but it all confirms the reverence that he had for the Benedictines of Subasio. They were the only ones to help him in his search for a small church, which turned out to be the Portiuncula. However, he did not want to become a monk. Here again we should stress that Francis' conversion was much more than a simple spiritual change; it was the choice of a specific social life, a fact which astounded contemporaries of his, such as Jacques de Vitry. In a monastery and under the rule, a monk had a clearcut position in the *ordo orantium*, among those who prayed. A monk had a specific preference for contemplative life, yet with that security of daily bread, with that severe yet certain and orderly rhythm that Francis had renounced by his choice. One must note that in his writings not a line can be found that could be considered critical of monasticism in this or that form. Nor is there the least shadow of that unsparing polemic that divided two great souls, namely, Peter the Venerable and St. Bernard of Clairvaux: each one defended his own interpretation of Benedictine life in its deepest spirit, the one in favor of the Cluniacs and the other in favor of the Cistercians.

A man on the fringe of society, a pauper among the poor, a leper among lepers, as Francis saw himself, could not criticize anybody or anything. Rather, someone like himself, who felt the peace of Christ to be the supreme need and goal, had to accept the opportunity and even the necessity for silence in the sense of refusing to make any criticism whatever. This required the humility to regard anyone else as superior to himself. Not even against the rich, lacking in charity and love for neighbor, did he ever raise his voice.

These new realities in Francis' life were psychologically binding upon him, in line with his conscience. Since he had accepted freely the limits on his activity that they entailed, they were for him worthy of great respect. His new attitudes have to be stressed and understood if we are to

place the saint accurately within the religious framework of his time.

In speaking of the Europe of the twelfth century, we have already noted how restless it was at all levels of society: how it engendered many different movements, and how various forms of confrontation sprang from this social restlessness. Society's criticism of clerics and monks turned out to be no less harsh than before and, above all, no less decisive in attacking their faults whenever they were evident. As regards the clergy in the entire West, a lively, cutting, critical spirit was abroad, marked by greater or lesser intensity and violence everywhere. The criticism did not spare the clergy at any level and reproached them for conduct unbecoming their spiritual mission and for incapability of fulfilling their pastoral mandate. They were also blamed for deliberate neglect of the life-style exemplified by Christ. They were criticized for culpably tending toward faults and vices that He had condemned: lust, greed for money and wealth, and last, but no less serious, simony, namely, the buying and selling of ecclesiastical dignities from the lowest to the highest rank. Precisely because of these grave faults of churchmen, the polemic continued in the eleventh century, even among the most religious and dedicated souls, over whether and up to what point the sacraments were valid when administered by guilty and unworthy priests. Among many opinions, the one that prevailed was the one that St. Augustine had already upheld against the Donatists: the sacramental power that priests possess was completely independent from the subjective condition of being in sin or not, on the part of whoever was celebrating the rite. One example of this power was eucharistic consecration, the most intense issue of the debate. Later, the discussion became more precise when it was stated that the sacrament acts *ex opere operato*, i.e., by the act's inner power, and not *ex opere operantis*, i.e., by the state of the one celebrating it. Still, we must point out that even though this doctrine ended the theological debate, in no way did the people's complaints against guilty priests come to a halt. Only

surface manifestations of their resentment changed. For a long time there had been agitation, sometimes with violence, against clergymen guilty of simony and concubinage. Then another approach began to spread that gained acceptance even in some diocesan councils. The sacraments were surely valid even if administered by sinful priests. Yet now these priests were being avoided, their rites deserted, and abandonment by the faithful was to be the sanction against and the visible sign of their guilt. These, in brief, were the current problems and the normal debate in St. Francis' time. In the years 1182 and 1183, two priests of the diocese of Liège [Belgium], Peter and Lambert, argued questions of this genre with extensive use of gospel and canonical texts. Another Lambert, called le Bègue (the stutterer) had no qualms about entering into conflict with his own bishop, the ordinary of Liège, and with his fellow priests, in defense of a holy life on the clergy's part. He also fought for a serious and strict commitment to pastoral care. This group of episodes is relevant and meaningful, and the instances are not isolated.

Francis did not want to become a priest or monk, nor did he want to complain against the hierarchy. He did, however, want silently and peaceably to avoid all confusion of his movement with others, such as the Waldensian, with which it could be confused. Waldo in the end had resolved his interior conflict by citing the famous passage attributed to St. Peter in the Acts of the Apostles (5:29): *"Oportet oboedire magis Deo quam hominibus"* [Obedience to God comes before obedience to men]. Still others invoked this text between the middle and the end of the twelfth century: e.g., the monk Henry and the already-mentioned Lambert le Bègue. On the other hand, the convert of Assisi, before stating how he came to find his path, his *forma vitae* (way of life), felt the need to express his devotion to and respect for priests. He did not look upon priests as simple human beings. He thus overcame implicitly the argument of the Waldensians, of which he was aware. He also knew of the Cathars' position, as

we shall see later on. He derived his respect for priests not only because of his own decision to become a penitent/reject, but also because he believed that a priest had the power to consecrate the body of Christ. What we might call the Christocentrism of Francis shows up here again and reasserts itself. The term, however, is perhaps too technical to be able to express the intensity of his feeling.

Finally, we cannot fail to bring out a kind of literary item that seems worthy of our interest. We have pointed out that an entire passage of the *Testament*, seen in the translation below, declares Francis' respect and devotion for priests. It seems to be no accident that this passage—in itself so complete and coherent as to seem like an insertion—is located in what is regarded as the biographical part of the *Testament*. It follows the part that tells of his leaving the world, and precedes the part that speaks of the problems that emerged when he began to accept companions. His respect for priests remains firm—the passage in question tells us this without the least argumentative tone—even if and when they do not share in helping their faithful. It is a respect due to them in itself and by itself, precisely because their hands can consecrate the host: "The Lord gave me such faith in churches that I would pray and simply say, 'We adore you, Lord Jesus Christ, through all your churches that are everywhere in the world, and we bless you because by your holy cross you have redeemed the world.' Then the Lord gave me and still gives me great faith in priests, who live according to the ways of the holy Roman Church through their ordination. Even if they were to persecute me, I would still turn to them. Even if I had the wisdom of Solomon and were to find priests poor in the things of this world in their own parishes, I would not preach contrary to their wishes. And these and all others I want to hold in awe and honor as my patrons. I do this because I see nothing in this physical world that belongs to the most high Son of God except for his most holy Body and his most holy Blood which the priests receive and alone administer to others. I desire above all that these most holy mysteries

be honored, venerated, and kept in sacred places. I also want to gather up his most holy name and his written words whenever I find them in improper places. I ask that they be gathered and set in a fitting place. We also ought to honor and venerate all theologians and those who are ministers of the most holy divine words, as those who provide us with bread and life."

It is scarcely necessary to recall at this point that the *Testament* chronologically falls within the last months of Francis' life. It serves as the synthesis of experience spreading over many years. Even in the passage quoted above, there is much, if not everything, to help us understand the essence of the world of ideas that gave Francis his direction. The passage gives us an historical perspective, if only we know how to read it well. After his choice between the two social conditions, he had to take a second step that was no less important or decisive than the first: he had to give some specific content to his choice. The premise was Francis' personal renunciation of priestly dignity, although he did not refuse to respect priests; the quoted passage stresses this meaning. Francis himself explains that, as a nonpriest, he respects priests not for being better educated and wiser, but simply because they are priests and, as such, they consecrate the Body and Blood of Christ, his only tangible presence on earth. This statement without doubt is a specific profession of faith in what is called eucharistic realism. As was said earlier in reference to Waldensianism, this statement had a clear meaning and an even clearer place in the religious world of that time. The very early years of the thirteenth century, which happen to coincide with Francis' conversion, mark beyond any doubt the high point of the rise and spread of the Catharist heresy. Indisputable sources make it clear that the heresy had reached Umbria before the beginning of the century, including the valley of Spoleto of which Assisi was one of the gems. Among the Catharists of whatever stripe, aversion to eucharistic realism was profound. In Germany, France, and Italy, we find a strong and cutting argument everywhere. If the

Body of Christ were even as large as the largest mountain (the name varied according to the locality), it would still end up totally consumed after so many centuries. It is obvious that this argument implied a rejection of the sacramental power of priests, and there is no need to belabor the point. In comparison, Francis asserted respect for priests, respect for the Body and Blood of Christ that are present in the sacrament of the Eucharist, and, above all, respect for Christ himself. Francis repeatedly stressed that Christ was the Son of God and our Lord. His statement was implicitly a refutation of the Catharist position that Christ was an angel, born of an angel, come to earth to reveal to men the satanic deception that had imprisoned them in matter. There was a prayer that seemed to be directed toward the Cathars, even though it had been present in the liturgy for some time. In it was praise and thanks for Christ, *quia per sanctam crucem tuam redemisti mundum* [because by your holy cross you have redeemed the world]. The exaltation of the cross was still another rebuff of Catharist beliefs. They judged it proper not to bless the cross but to curse it. The cross was the instrument for the suffering and death of the one who had come to show us the way of salvation (although for many Cathars, Christ's death was merely in appearance).

From the perspective in which we have examined it, this passage from the *Testament* is a valid expression of Francis' attitude toward priests throughout his life. He felt this way not only in his last years, for he had certainly known some Waldensians and Cathars as a youth. Our certainty about his attitude is based on the way he stressed it by saying, "the Lord has given me and gives me faith in priests." He joins the present, within which he is writing, with the past, i.e., with a return to the moment of his withdrawal from the world, the moment that his thoughts returned to.

At that moment when Francis had chosen God for his father and all people for his brethren, he then had to work for the salvation of himself and of others. He wanted to do this not as a monk, nor as a priest, nor as a heretic,

but rather as a faithful son of the Church.

The *Legend of the Three Companions* tends to give some degree of importance to the presence and intervention of Bishop Guido of Assisi. So does Thomas of Celano, more or less explicitly. We have no reason to doubt this detail. Yet, what we do about the bishop—very energetic, proud, and conscious of his dignity—makes us think that he may have found it difficult to understand Francis' decision at the level of its deepest motives. We can imagine that Guido helped, comforted, and counseled him, but not in a way that would satisfy Francis on a spiritual level. We will explain this more fully later on. In any event, Francis had accepted literally the words that the crucifix at San Damiano had spoken to him in one of the decisive moments of his conversion. He returned to that church and started to rebuilt it. Regarding his personal appearance, all the sources agree that he took the hermit's habit. It consisted of coarse cloth, shoes, a walking stick, and a belt around the waist. It did not differ from the habits of many other hermits everywhere in those days, as described by various witnesses. In a sense, his hermitage was at San Damiano, but it was a hermitage *sui generis*. Since he had to assemble the needed materials for the church's reconstruction, he was obliged to return into the city in search of stone. We can consider as true the words that the *Legend* attributes to him: "Give me one stone for one reward, two stones for two rewards, and three stones for three rewards." This was neither the speech of a theologian nor of a priest. He kept it simple and basic in order to reach everybody, yet not everybody managed to understand him. Some were touched upon seeing him so different from before. Others, however, continued to mock him and looked upon him as out of his mind. The drama of Pietro Bernardone comes to mind here, a deep and painful drama. It tormented him to see his beloved son, who, in his eyes, was lost forever and like a dead man. Whenever he would come across Francis, he would curse him. Francis' reaction betrayed his interior repressed suffering. He approached a poor man with the promise to share his

alms with him on the condition that the pauper bless him every time his father cursed him. In this way, he was able to tell Pietro Bernardone that God had given him a father who blessed him in place of a father who cursed him.

Among those who took him for a fool was his brother, the same one who had made the mocking proposal to buy a certain amount of his sweat while the saint shivered in the cold of a harsh winter. As best as can be determined, he endured two very hard years while working at San Damiano. He forced his sickly and delicate body to take on burdensome mortifications. The sources give us an idea of what kind of effort he had to make in order to eat for the first time the scraps of food that he had gleaned with his one and only bowl from the charity of people he visited from door to door. No less effort on his part was required to overcome his reluctance to beg alms for the oil of San Damiano from a house where a feast was in progress. Many of those present were people he knew, and he was ashamed to go in. He overcame his feelings, however, and entered the house. He presented himself before everyone as a sinner because of his shame and, in French, requested alms for the oil to light his church. Still, his dreams of grandeur did not stop, if we can believe what we read in the *Legend of the Three Companions*. It seems he would launch an appeal, always in French, to passersby, asking them to leave an offering for the place that was the lodging of ladies whose fame and lives in all the Church would give glory to God. (We say "ladies," because this seems to be the meaning of the Latin term *dominae* as contained in the *Legend*.) Was this prophecy? Some of the hagiographical sources think so. Was it an ideal that he foresaw as possible? It is not for us to enter into the inviolable secret of a soul such as Francis of Assisi.

The hermit, then, did not succeed in breaking all ties with his native city and its social web, which he had voluntarily left. He had to return for various reasons: for San Damiano, but also for the requirements of his charitable work, e.g., his maintenance of the pauper who served as a father for him. But he had to return among

those he had known, to the insults of some and to the understanding of others. He was performing by himself a penance that was as severe as it was solitary.

2 *The revelation of the Gospel*

Francis had barely concluded his reconstruction work at San Damiano, when another event, casual only in external appearance, seemed to show him another road. He accepted it quickly in the way that suited him, and that fully matched his aspirations. Yet the incident also permits us to see how much Francis shared, despite having been layman and merchant, in the spiritual attitude that was common among many of his contemporaries. In a happy choice of words, it is called "the evangelical awakening." Committed already to his life of penance, he was attending Mass. At the Gospel, he heard the admonishment of Jesus to the apostles as he sent them forth to preach: "Provide yourselves with no gold or silver, not even with a few coppers for your purses, with no traveling bag for the journey or spare tunic or footwear or a staff" (Mt 10:9-10). For him these words were an enlightenment, to judge from the accounts in the sources and especially in the *Legend of the Three Companions*. These words seem to have placed him in contact with the gospel for the first time in such an explicit and conscious way. Francis then decided that this was indeed the way to follow, and immediately he saw two consequences. He realized first of all that he had a confirming indication of the spiritual sense and purpose of his choice. From then on, we could say that these were the evangelical sense and purpose as well. His choice, then, more and more took on the attitude of poverty, without losing any of the original quality or theme of passage over to the fringe of humanity. He was thus shown a purpose, that of proclamation, of sharing with others what he himself had already obtained and reached: in other words, a call to preaching.

The *Legend of the Three Companions* brings out this fact for our attention: from the moment that Francis heard Jesus' gospel admonition, he set aside the hermit's habit

in order to put on another one that was, if possible, still poorer. It consisted of a rough cloth draped over his body with a cord in place of the belt. He abandoned the walking stick and the shoes, shabby as they were. In this way he matched the words of the gospel more closely, with a literalism that was characteristic of the penitential lay movements of that time. At the same time, the cord around his waist accentuated in him the presence of distinctive traits of penitents, often seen with cords around their necks or their waists. We do not know the themes of his preaching. The fact, however, that we have no indication if he asked permission to preach from anyone in Assisi, leads us to believe that, in reality, his preaching was a simple, brotherly exhortation to live a Christian life and to repent of one's sins. Confirmation of this comes from the *Legend of the Three Companions*, the validity of which we have been able to establish progressively. It confines itself to saying, "He began, by divine inspiration, to be a proclaimer of evangelical perfection and to preach penance publicly in all simplicity." All who heard him were amazed by the power of his words.

Without any details or personal episodes, Francis himself tells us in the *Testament* how he concluded the second stage of his conversion and how it ended up having a specific object. The whole process—and this fact is clearly relevant—can be traced through a specific chronological framework and, as far as we can tell, determined with fair accuracy.

In the two years he spent at San Damiano, from the time he had renounced his father up until the beginning of his preaching, Francis had encountered a number of people who insulted him. Yet he also met others who basically followed him with curiosity, if not with troubled admiration. Yet he always remained a loner. The fact that many considered him to be crazy means only that not every deed of his was always understood in the correct way. The friend who was at his side for a month, when he took refuge in a hiding place in the early phase of his conversion, simply disappeared. There is no

further word on him, nor was he among Francis' first followers.

3 The coming of the companions

From the time that Francis began to speak in public with persuasive effect, the situation started to change. Some people now decided to follow him in his example. The majority of the sources tell us that the first one was a prominent personality of Assisi, the rich and powerful Bernard of Quintavalle. He approached Francis and confided in him his intention to join him in his life and habit. He asked him, however, to come to his house at night to talk it over. This episode is accepted with some reserve, since it resembles the one in the Gospel of John (3:1-2) in which Nicodemus came to Jesus in secret at night. In any case it serves to indicate—if it is true, and the *Legend* is generally trustworthy—that Francis was held suspect to the point of being welcomed only when the welcoming would not be seen. Otherwise, *fama publica* would start its buzz of curiosity.

The two met and reached an understanding. Francis never forgot that Bernard had been the first to follow him. Francis held him as his favorite and, as we shall see, designated him upon his death as his exemplary successor in the life of the Friars Minor. Along with Bernard, at the same time or shortly thereafter, there came Peter—known to us as Peter Cattani. Their arrival marked the beginning of the *fraternitas* [brotherhood] gathering around the saint. From this point onward, Francis' personal aims could not be valid for everyone, especially by reason of a specific point that raised a new problem with disturbing aspects. Bernard of Quintavalle was a layman and, as such, created no problem for the fraternal community that was being established. Peter Cattani, however, was a priest. How could he become part of the community? In particular, what authority and what place could be established on the part of a man of the Church who wanted to follow the model of penance proposed and offered by—we repeat—a layman? The difficulty, which would never have been

small in any Christian century, was even more serious at the beginning of the thirteenth. At that time clerical authority on all levels had an unassailable importance and preeminence that was never attained before or since.

We realize, then, that his personal encounter with the gospel was not Francis' second decisive event. Rather, it was the point at which he began to draw friars around him. Francis himself tells us this without ambiguity in one of the central passages of the *Testament* that reveal his interior story. This passage describes, in a comprehensive vision, the whole formation of the first *fraternitas*: "When God gave me some friars, there was no one to tell me what I should do; but the Most High himself made it clear to me that I must live the life of the gospel (*secundum formam sancti evangeiii*). I had this written down briefly and simply and his holiness the pope confirmed it for me."

These are few words, but once again they are very concise and quite difficult to analyze for all their meaning. First of all, the chronological references, mentioned above, are helpful along with the other signs that we have of Francis' spiritual and interior development. Confirming the data in the biographies insofar as they agree, he tells us that he lived through a period of uncertainty. This did not affect at all his firm and unshakable decision to leave the world. But it did affect what he had to do with respect to those who united with him as brothers, specifically Bernard and Peter. We will see why the problem involved these two only.

We have already adverted to the fact that Francis did not want to become a priest, a canon, or a monk, but something different. We cannot avoid stressing at this point a factor that strongly influenced the situation: Peter was a priest, and yet he turned to Francis for light and active direction. This generated the difficulty as to whether Francis could accept priests in his group, both at that point and in the future. Another serious question touched upon what Peter could seek and have from Francis. It is evident that his calling toward God was not fulfilled by his status as a priest. Accordingly, he was seeking

something new and different that none of the existing institutions—in his specific case, monasticism—could offer.

Over the centuries, the institution of monasticism had been developed and refined in its various forms in line with a specific model, namely, the primitive community of Jerusalem. As described in the Acts of the Apostles, it was a union of hearts joined in the memory and the commemoration of Christ. All who belonged to it pooled their possessions, each one receiving according to need. This model became known afterwards as the *ecclesiae primitivae forma*. It seemed to inspire, upon the formation of the Roman-Christian Empire, a number of centers dedicated to cultivating ascetic individual perfection under the direction of an abbot. Naturally, this way of life became known as the new form of martyrdom as martyrdom diminished with the end of the persecutions. It also became known as the *militia Christi*, in which the monk was the combatant against the temptations of the flesh and the allure of the world. With the emergence of the Carolingian empire, the form of monasticism deriving from St. Benedict of Nursia prevailed over others, leading to an overall systematization of the whole phenomenon of monastic life. It could have different specific features on a local level by virtue of the customs that could vary between monasteries or groups of monasteries. The structure known as cenobitism was implanted. It involved "personal poverty" with the renunciation of individual ownership of anything at all, while the monastery as such could own assets that would serve the needs of the monks. A monastery's goods were often ample enough to take good care of the monks as well as to enable them, it should be noted, to provide considerable and meritorious help to the needy. Besides the cenobites who were clustered in monasteries, there were hermits who lived in the solitude of the forests. They kept apart from human contacts, fed on herbs and roots, and pursued a life of contemplation and prayer. It is true that hermits occasionally attracted other people who followed their example of

"being naked to imitate the naked Christ," in line with St. Jerome's exhortation. Yet even when they formed groups, they still remained apart from one another.

The phenomenon of monasticism, in its two fundamental forms, cenobitic and eremitic, had a tremendous forward thrust between the tenth and eleventh centuries. During that time a series of reforms, as they were called, renewed religious commitment, disciplinary vigor, and solidity of structures, making monasticism a supportive column of the Church. It was no coincidence that it was one of the decisive factors of the renewal of the Church of Rome and of the East in the eleventh century. This renewal began first with the Cluniac movement and then with that of the Cistercians, as discussed elsewhere.

Still, the very power, vastness, and prosperity of the monastic phenomenon exposed it to the criticism of the faithful. They complained that monastic poverty was apparent and not real. Even if the monks were personally poor, the monastery itself was rich. It assured all the monks of their needs, without any risk of hunger or of genuine misery. Moreover, the monks lived right in their monastery, bound by stability, i.e., the obligation of permanent residence. There were certainly examples for the faithful of strictness of life among the monks, but they did not exercise direct care of souls. This gave rise to the charge that monks were engaged in a selfish search for individual perfection, without concern for the salvation of other people. This charge was made even among the monks themselves, and St. Bernard found it necessary to brand it as an outright temptation from the Devil. Another temptation was especially serious: to leave the monastery and dedicate oneself to preaching.

For all these reasons it is said, not incorrectly, that the monasticism of the twelfth century had lived through a profound crisis. This created a spiritual void that the clergy alone failed to overcome and that various spontaneous movements—whether orthodox or heretical—had sought to fill. However, Robert d'Arbrissel, along with Vitale de Savigny or Bernard de Tiron among the orthodox and

Tanchelm and the monk Henry among the heretics, had concluded their activity in one of two ways. Either they founded new monasteries that did nothing to change the existing situation, or they created heretical communities that began to conflict with church authorities, but that intervened in particular situations only in part and on a local basis. Meanwhile, the new religious feeling pushed everywhere with its demands.

These demands can be summarized, with some repetition of conditions already noted, in a few specific demands: conformity of the lives of clergymen to the guidelines given by Christ in the gospel, with purity of customs and severe discipline; spiritual service to the faithful that would always be assiduous, continual, and truly available and effective; nearness, including emotional, of the clergy to as many as turned to them for comfort, help, and support amid their needs. A notably frequent request was for aid to the poor and needy, of whatever category and for whatever reason. Misery was especially hard to bear in the cities rather than in the rural areas, and the urban needy were even more afflicted.

Given all this, one can well understand how and why Peter Cattani saw in Francis someone who was undertaking a new way. To him, Francis was setting out on a path in a direction as yet untried and not at all clear. However, to Peter's intuition, even though confused, it was the right path. Francis, in turn, realized that his personal life choice had a validity that needed refinement but that nonetheless was sure.

At this juncture it became necessary to find a way to establish specific structures and to put into practice what was still an idea in process of exploration and clarification. This was not easy to accomplish, contrary to what we might think now. In fact, the mere presence of a priest in the little group caused a crack in the ecclesiastical order long since definitively established by that time. This order established the role of the clergy under the hierarchy including the pope: some were bound to the common life, others were not; among the latter were canons and among

the former were monks, who were normally enclosed in monasteries or isolated in hermitages. Then there were the faithful: some of them, although actually not many, were dedicated to a life of penance. As to the care of souls, the clerics were jealous guardians of that activity. Several times, especially during the twelfth century, the clerics engaged in bitter quarrels with any monks who broached the possibility of themselves engaging in the work of serving the faithful. The clerics denied them any right to do so. Within the Order of Friars Minor, a series of events from the middle of the thirteenth century onward proved that worries over clerical reaction were not idle ones for Francis and his followers. The sources on Francis, however, do not mention these concerns. At any rate, this is not the place to discuss them further.

There was, surely, a problem to confront and resolve. A spontaneous freedom of action had characterized Francis' behavior while he was alone and master of his own will. This could not go on after "the Lord had given him companions," few in number as they were. Here we find ourselves faced with one of the *Testament's* personal statements that is most specific and, at the same time, most difficult: "There was no one to tell me what I should do." In the first place, he clearly affirms his autonomy and the originality of his own initiative. This initiative did not derive from anyone else's counsel or suggestion, but, as he immediately points out, it was the product of divine revelation. He also means that Bishop Guido himself had in no way counseled or directed the nascent *fraternitas*. In this matter it seems to us to be useless to construct unprovable hypotheses that would go beyond Francis' relationship with Guido and would dwell on the nuisance or worry that others of these communities, large or small, had caused elsewhere for their own bishops. Francis had asserted the originality of his idea and had explicitly stated the absence of all human help and, implicitly, of any help from the church hierarchy. It is not surprising that these statements amount to a polite, serene, but unmistakable criticism of a hierarchy that did not know how

to answer, protect, or guide a group of the faithful, however small. Even though he shows no sign of resentment or bitterness—and this does not surprise us about Francis—his statement of fact is still no less plain, exact, and it would seem, hard. The next words of the *Testament* confirm this: "but the Most High himself made it clear to me that I must live the life of the gospel."

To this revelation the *Legend of the Three Companions* makes explicit reference, followed by the second *Vita* of Thomas of Celano. They offer a response and a direction that seem to match well the line of spiritual development and the mentality seen so far.

According to the *Legend*, Bernard and Peter were particularly unsure as to what they should do. Along with Francis, they entered a church, probably that of San Nicola in the present-day Piazza del Commune. It is noteworthy that they stayed away from San Rufino, which was served by canons and the bishop. There they performed a ceremony that had been a custom since Christian antiquity, known as the *sortes apostolorum* [lot of the apostles]. It consisted first in asking by prayer for divine assistance. Then, someone would open the Gospels to read whatever passages turned up in order to apply them to the case at hand, for which illumination from God had been sought. It has to be pointed out that the Church, many times both before and after Francis' era, had intervened to discourage and condemn this rite as superstitious. These efforts were as useless as were the attempts to eliminate another custom, no less frequently practiced, namely, the ordeal.

This recourse to the *sortes apostolorum* is valuable because it clarifies for us the tone and, one may say, the limits of the religious piety of Francis and his companions. They appear to have been on a level that can be called popular piety, a term that is debatable but also useful. This explains why the *Legend* presents the scene with a series of justifications and precautions: "being simple men, they did not know how to find the passage in the Gospel telling of the renunciation of the world. Therefore, they besought God that he would show them his will the

first time they opened the book." After praying, Francis picked up the closed book, knelt before the altar, and opened the book. At the first open place his eyes fell upon the Lord's counsel: "If you wish to be perfect, go and sell what you own and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven." Upon reading it, Francis rejoiced greatly and gave thanks to God. Yet, since he was a true worshipper of the Trinity, he wanted it confirmed by a threefold message. He opened the book a second and a third time. At the second opening there appeared the words, "Take nothing for the journey," and at the third, this passage: "If anyone wants to be a follower of mine, let him renounce himself. . . ." Given this triple confirmation, Francis turned to his two companions and declared that their rule and form of life was contained in those gospel passages. They were to conform themselves to them, along with everyone else who thereafter wanted to join them.

One cannot overlook the fact that the first *Vita* of Thomas of Celano (not the second!) gives a somewhat different account. It completely omits the episode of the threefold consultation with the gospel text. It also reduces the encounter of Francis and the revelation of the counsels of Jesus to the first episode alone on his hearing of the gospel text at Mass that we mentioned earlier. In that first version, he adds that Francis had the help of a priest who supposedly explained and showed to him the passages dealing with the poverty of one who bears the word of Christ, and with the commitment to preaching. In that case—as Thomas says with his literary expression and with his desire to shade the words of Francis in the *Testament*—the decisive enlightenment would have come to the saint from a priest. This would totally contradict what is unmistakably explicit in the words of the *Testament*: "No one told me what I should do." It is probable that Thomas, in the first *Vita*, was not well-informed about the kind and sequence of events at Assisi, and had combined two distinct episodes into one. It is, however, plausible that he deliberately withheld mention of a rite which, owing

to its popular usage, could seem strange in someone who was about to become the founder of a religious order and a saint.

We also notice some diffidence in this connection in the *Legend of the Three Companions*. It also attempts to avoid giving the impression that the saint had practiced some folk rite. Its version is that they opened the book at random because they did not know how to find those parts of the gospel that talked about renouncing the world; it then asserts that they did this three times because Francis was a true worshipper of the Trinity. In point of fact, anyone familiar with the piety of the thirteenth century would not be surprised that the three had used the *sortes apostolorum*, nor that one of them was a priest.

The caution of the sources is, however, valuable from a critical perspective. It confirms for us that the episode is, in its general lines, authentic. It would have been hard to attribute to the saint a story that diminished his image and the quality of his message in the minds of educated people, unless the story were in fact true. We can recall again that Thomas' first *Vita* says nothing about it. A further confirmation comes from the fact that the same gospel passages are cited again in the Rule of 1221, as we shall see.

The important result of all this is that, after the consultation with the sacred texts, the originality of Francis' goal clearly emerged. We find this new attitude described in the *Testament* as clearly as possible: *vivere secundum formam sancti evangelii*. It is evident that this is based on the other, much older expression, *ecclesiae primitivae forma*. We cannot say for sure, however, that this latter expression was chronologically in use at the time we are discussing. Even if it were not in use, it was still a living reality, and we must stress its originality and importance. Monastic poverty, modeled on the primitive community of Jerusalem, had often left itself open to criticism from religious people in the thirteenth century: they complained that this poverty was more apparent than real. Priests did not escape this criticism either, whether they lived alone (although often with concubine and children) or in

canonical communities. They too were castigated for not following true poverty as had been lived by Christ and the apostles. All this was heard not only from heretics—which would have surprised no one—but also from men of the Church known for their virtue.

The fact was that longtime custom in church life had consolidated, if not hardened, a variety of ways of religious behavior. It was not that Christ and his example were not present, or that there was no awareness of his having been "the carpenter's son." For example, one Stephen of Muret, and especially his followers who founded the Order of Grandmont, had drawn much attention to this. No less vehement was the uproar caused by Waldo and the Waldensians. Both the saint and the heretic had clearly brought out the meaning and the value of the poverty of Christ. There were also other *pauperes Christi*, poor people of Christ. Their poverty gave to Europe a sense of diffuse trouble, of an evil that did not conceal its seriousness. One need only think of the immense mass of the poor and the abandoned, both in the rural areas as well as in the city.

Still, all this did not really shake the structures of church life. Even though Alexander III had shown some understanding for Waldo, the same was not true on the part of the archbishop of Lyon, Jean de Belles-Mains. To summarize what we have already said in this case, Jean appeared to push Waldo into heretical positions, after a string of encounters with him.

It was a series of brilliant intuitions that Francis had received; they met needs that were widespread among the faithful, and not only on a popular level. Yet at the same time they succeeded in not disturbing or worrying the church hierarchy, whether pastors and bishops on the local level or the pope at the summit. Certainly after all that has been said here, the new and even revolutionary value of Francis' evangelical message stands out. He presented it not as a personal and individual matter, as pauperism pure and simple, but as a total commitment to human brotherhood. From the individual it extended

to the Christian community, reaching all levels with an intensity that seeks to create a new brotherhood in Christ by the drawing power of this gospel message. This message is passed on through a preaching that is not concerned with dry and remote theological problems. Instead, the preaching is addressed to everyone in a plain and convincing way, reinforced and proved by example. This approach let this new form of poverty gain its influence and show its importance. A monk—to review a basic point in order to see the difference clearly—was personally poor, and renounced, in the terminology of that era, *proper* ownership, but did not renounce *common* ownership, i.e., whatever the monastery owned. Francis, however, followed what he saw as the example given by Christ and the apostles in the Gospels: he renounced both *proper* and *common* ownership. His was a total poverty, without any sort of exception. This is why we stressed, in explaining the meaning and importance of his conversion, that it was not just an *economic* or *religious* matter, but was a change of *social condition.* Clerics and monks were expected to have the means to exist, and did not run the risk of hunger or of the uncertainties of daily living. Francis, by refusing this security, affirmed the true poverty that for him was total and ought to be total. It was to be like that of Jesus, who said that the Son of Man had nowhere to lay his head, and who entrusted himself to Divine Providence, like the lilies of the field and the birds of the sky.

For the time being, the three had no lodging. They sought refuge in a cabin near a small abandoned church—apparently this one had also been repaired by Francis—called St. Mary of the Angels, also known in the documents as St. Mary of the Portiuncula. This came to be the base for their frequent contacts with the local citizenry, which must have been dumbfounded by the conversion of Bernard of Quintavalle and Peter Cattani. In their new abode they were joined by another brother, Giles, and, owing to a not unusual change of conscience, still another priest, Sylvester. He was of the church of San Damiano.

Sylvester, in fact, had surprised them all by his entry. Only a few days beforehand, knowing that Francis had some financial resources after Bernard's arrival, he had come to him asking payment for a load of stones that he had given him for the reconstruction of San Damiano. The saint did not debate whether the bill was fair or not and gave him all that he asked for. This promptness and, even more, the evident scorn for money on the part of one who seemed to need it so much owing to his condition of poverty, shook Sylvester. He repented of his greed and asked admission to become part of the small community. The group thus began slowly to expand, although still made up only of residents of Assisi.

Francis remained the point of reference and the soul of the small community for everything and everybody. According to the uniform testimony of the sources, he was as happy as if he had found a treasure. He sang in Italian and French to show outwardly his interior joy. Still, the life he and his companions shared was not easy. Some people admired them, but a greater number still insulted them, calling them fools or mocking them. Others charged them with hypocrisy—the word is not in the sources, but the thought is clear—and accused them of giving up everything in order to live on others' backs. The brethren's manner, however, was impressive. Its starting point was the greeting that they uttered to everyone they met. Francis stated that he had learned it from divine revelation and had begun to use it while he was still alone: "May God grant you peace." Many were the times that these words succeeded in placating troubled souls.

Then there came the hour of their great leap forward; they left their native city. The meaning of this event, is of capital importance for the course of later events. As long as Francis and his companions stayed in Assisi and in that diocese, they remained under the jurisdiction of Bishop Guido. Up until then the bishop had followed the activities of the converted merchant and his companions with condescending tolerance. He probably regarded it all as

an episode of intense and respectable fervor, but also as something destined to remain closed in upon itself. Moreover, what we know of the city's attitude toward them would not lead anyone to worry about a mass movement in their direction. The controlled and circumspect prudence of the sources, written when Francis was already the holy founder of a great religious order, is not enough to conceal the essential facts: in general, the local people were hostile. Affected interests, wounded feelings, disappointed family hopes must all have generated at least some distrust if not rancor, through the medium of *fama publica*. Guido, however, did not have to worry. The tiny religious brotherhood showed the greatest respect for religious authority and for the hierarchy.

The situation changed radically as soon as they left the diocese. Certainly no one could stop them from moving from place to place dressed as penitents. However, as the phenomenon of heresy became more serious and worrisome, some canonical norms were applied with increasing attention and rigor. They required that any form of preaching be previously authorized by local authority, either by the pastor or, better yet, by the bishop. In any event, the brethren split up. Francis and Giles made their way through the region of Ancona. The others, went elsewhere, although the documents do not say where. Wherever they went, they brought serene joy by their praise of God. We know this for certain, however, only in regard to Francis. He would express his gladness by singing, normally in French. It does not seem farfetched to assume that he projected his attitude onto his companions, especially when we consider the lively, youthful fervor and animation with which he expressed the feelings that, shortly before his death, he felt the need to set down in the *Canticle of Brother Sun*.

The change of values that we spoke of earlier as Francis' life choice, his existential option at the moment of his conversion, continued to work in him. The joy that sprang from his heart and that lived in his song proved that what had been bitter for him came to seem sweet to him. This

joy also had a social and even a shock value, for it showed to anyone who was wretched, derelict, or abandoned the precise nature as well as the deep meaning of his or her situation: happiness and unhappiness cannot be reduced purely and simply to an economic common denominator. They are not predetermined facts dependent upon realities outside of ourselves. Rather, they spring from our interiority, from the depths of our consciousness. Francis surely had not read the moralistic analyses on wealth and poverty that were common in the works of the twelfth century. These analyses took into account the changes that were occurring in contemporary society, including those of an economic nature. They often dwelt on the psychological dimensions of misery and traced its repercussions upon the level of basic human feelings: greed, envy, sadness, and that debasement called *acedia*, sloth. Francis understood these feelings and, as a rich man, had perhaps also noticed the burden of hatred that could accompany them. Against these faults and sins that the condition of misery could provoke, he answered with his song. For him, liberation was the highest value of poverty.

When they returned after a short time from this first journey, they met with Bishop Guido. He was worried over the fact that they wanted to hold no possessions. His concern grew as they were joined by some other Assisians: Sabatino, Morico, and John de Capella. Francis responded to Guido by saying that if they possessed any goods, they would also need arms to defend and keep them. Conflicts and quarrels would then crop up and block their love of God and of neighbor. With these words Francis displayed his feelings about poverty as total liberation. Long afterwards, toward the end of the thirteenth century, when differences had taken hold within the order, the Franciscan Jacopone da Todi felt driven to sing of total poverty as the possession of all the realms and the riches of the world. One who had nothing and felt need of nothing was truly the richest of all.

What was the attitude that greeted the brethren on the part of the people they met during their first mission (a

term that was not yet in use)? Once again, the *Legend of the Three Companions* is our best source. It gives us to understand that they encountered an attitude of wonder, dominated not so much by comprehension and a desire to imitate them as by sheer perplexity, similar to that of the inhabitants of Assisi. More important and revealing is the item about the themes of Francis' preaching. Although he did not yet preach *plene*, i.e., in the full sense of the word, "he exhorted all men and women to fear God and to do penance for their sins, while Brother Giles exhorted them to believe and to follow the excellent counsels of Francis."

We have already noted that, after their return from their first venture outside of Assisi, other brethren joined the first group. A second expedition was decided upon, and Francis informed them all of the results of his own experience. He began by warning them against the discouragement that could issue from the incomprehension and indifference of the recipients of their words and exhortations. Even if, in themselves, they were small and weak, he said they should trust in the presence and the help of God. They were to proclaim confidently the need for penance, for everyone to avoid evil and to observe the divine commandments. They would encounter some listeners who would be faithful, attentive, and meek, while others would be faithless, proud, and blaspheming. In either case, they were to maintain their serenity and humbly accept every mortification. Some were beset by fear, but Francis reassured them with his foresight that they would succeed, and that their little group would grow more and more in a short period of time. The biographers see in this instance the supernatural gift of prophecy.

This second mission had a fairly large range of action, at least on the part of Bernard of Quintavalle; we know that he reached Florence. The description of their activity is not really triumphalistic. We read as ever of the usual suspicion, of petty curiosity, of clumsy questions. There is, however, a detail of importance and interest to us. They

were once asked to what order they belonged, and they answered that "they were men of penance (*viri poenitentiales*) from the city of Assisi." The *Legend* goes on to say: "*Nondum enim ordo eorum dicebatur religio,*" i.e., their group was not yet spoken of as a religious order. This episode identifies for us various specific aspects of the awareness that the group around Francis had of itself and of the meaning it had within the society of that time. They had set aside any aspirations to live as hermits, so as to give special meaning to their own withdrawal from the world, which they did voluntarily in order to provide an example of penance. It has been correctly pointed out, then, that the beginning of Franciscanism lies in the phenomenon of the *fratres de penitentia.* They had imposed on themselves a set of obligations and duties that were not previously embodied and determined in a rule. Rather, they had settled on these duties individually for a specific purpose with an eye to another more general and, in some ways, wider purpose, namely, that of penance. Evidently, when the ideal that someone (in this case, Francis) had worked out became accepted and shared by others, some characteristic label came into use. In this case, it was their place of origin.

The sources on the lives of the first brethren give us a large amount of details, some edifying, others touching. When one deals with stories told many years after the events, there is always some hesitation about their authenticity. Yet they cannot simply be rejected as false, in the sense of not being literally true as they were told. Even if some measure of "poetry," that the passage of time can add to events, has inserted itself into their "truth," they still serve to characterize a general state of mind. It can also be a way of symbolizing something in the past that does not match the details of the given story, but that leaves behind some of its perfume, so to speak.

In the case of Francis' first followers, even the anecdotes serve to indicate, as they were recorded, what echo remained of the early years. They are also of interest since they normally involve the attitude of the public toward

these "men of penance," which is worth knowing. There is no doubt that some people held them in respectful admiration. There is also no doubt that others mocked them, insulted them, and even robbed them of their poor garments, unless they gave them back when they realized that underneath the brothers were stark naked. They then would cut the cowls from the habits or else throw mud at Francis and his followers. There were even instances when, while two of them were walking together on the road, a rock would be thrown at one and the other would quickly move in front of him to shield him from the blow.

Still more significant, within the limits we are observing, is the episode at Florence during the second mission. The protagonist was Bernard of Quintavalle. It was recorded in the *Legend of the Three Companions* sometime after his death in 1246. Bernard and his companion were at Florence during the winter, seeking a haven from the bitter cold, when they came to a house with a portico with a baking oven within the portico. They asked the lady of the house for permission to stay in the portico; but she allowed them only to stay near the baking oven. Even that refuge was denied them, however, when the woman's husband returned and sent them away. He feared that they might be thieves or tramps.

The next morning the pair went early to a nearby church. There they were found by the lady who had been unwilling to give them room in her portico. She was surprised to see them deep in prayer. She was even more surprised by the scene that followed. They were approached by a man—his name is given as Guido—who was distributing alms to the poor (a not uncommon practice then). When he offered alms to Bernard and his companion, they refused them. When he asked them why, they explained themselves with words that seem to reflect an authentic, lively, heartfelt attitude on the part of the first companions. Their reply deserves to be known in its entirety. Bernard said, "It is true that we are poor, but poverty is not as difficult for us to bear as it is for other poor people, since we have voluntarily become poor by

the grace of God." He went on to explain that they once had possessions, but had given them up by a free and spontaneous decision and given everything away to the poor for the love of God. In doing so, they had followed the counsel for evangelical perfection. Hearing all this, the woman who had denied them welcome in her portico now invited them to her house. They declined, however, choosing to stay at Guido's house, as he wanted to know more about them. He had them as guests for several days and admired their example of living.

From this striking account a first element of extreme importance emerges, with no possibility of mistake. During this visit to Florence, Bernard and his companion limited themselves just to giving an example of living, foregoing the activity they had carried out at Assisi, such as singing the Lord's praises and exhorting people to penance. Staying at Guido's house, talking with him, giving brotherly spiritual advice—all these things indicate precisely their purpose of avoiding the least possibility of conflict or misunderstanding on the part of the clergy or of the faithful. Let us not ignore the fact that the cities of that time, Florence in particular, were full of preachers, both orthodox and nonorthodox. In the humble, submissive, and prudent conduct of the two brethren, we can discern their desire to avoid every chance of being confused with others, and of losing their specific image as poor people on the edge of society. This was the characteristic that they wanted to stand out the most. Only after they returned from this trip did they concern themselves (as we shall see) about associating the opportunity for preaching penance with their example of renunciation.

This episode is still more interesting for us insofar as it allows us to grasp one of the most significant aspects of what we can call the technique of penetration and communication used by the Franciscan group in the surrounding world. Francis had provided his companions with some perceptive observations before what we have called the second mission. His observations are considered even more valid insofar as they sought to find an opening

through which they could go into the midst of a world that was always alien and often hostile, but a world that they nevertheless had to penetrate and work within, at whatever cost. The solidarity and brotherly love of the companions functioned as a powerful bond among them in the midst of the most varied difficulties.

Upon their return to Assisi, the lack of space, among other things, emerged as a particularly serious problem. We learn this from both the first *Vita* by Thomas of Celano and the *Legend of the Three Companions* with regard to Rivo Torto. There Francis had assigned to each one a specific place that was rigorously respected. Yet no less valuable was the place where they stayed near the little church of the Portiuncula. They must have occupied it in fact, but without any authorization, since it was correctly considered to be abandoned.

At this point it is perhaps opportune to take a broad look at what had come to pass during the relatively brief time of the community's formation, following Francis' two years in solitude and after new companions started to join him. We have to bear in mind always that which we have called the connection between the hagiographical-biographical sources and the *Testament*, so that we might come up with an historically valid and persuasive portrayal.

There is no doubt that the first companions felt the meaning of their choice in a concrete and specific way and that they had considered all its weight and importance. All of them understood at the deepest level, what is called the passage from one part of society to another, the entry amid those who were on society's edges. The reports of insults, offenses, and maltreatment confirm that this passage was made harshly and promptly clear to them by the reaction of other people, even if they themselves had not been completely aware of it. New members continued to join this original group until, in 1209, it counted eleven brethren, twelve with Francis. The group saw in its founder and example all the meaning of their choice, with ever greater clarity. We can base ourselves in some

way on the sources available to us, although with every critical caution. While they do insist on this aspect of marginalization, poverty, and suffering, they seem to ignore specific points that have been brought out elsewhere as essential to the turnaround that Francis had imposed on his life. One point is his pity for the lepers and for outcasts in general. The other is his intention to provide for his own living by working or, in extreme need, by begging.

Now, it is true that the lepers seem to disappear from the horizon of Francis' activity. This, however, is only because the interest of anyone telling a story tends to forget the details of daily living in order to turn attention to those deeds and happenings that are supposed to precede more important later events. After a while we will return to an episode that shows that nothing changed on the saint's part as far as outcasts were concerned, whether they were lepers or even true bandits off the road.

The problem of the means of living for the brethren is an area where the perspective of the order's later development has, in some ways, distorted the reality of life of the group around Francis. It is, therefore, necessary to shift the focus to the panorama that seems to issue from the sources that deal with the question. The impression produced by a cursory reading of the sources is of broad, continual reliance on alms. Yet one can reread the episode about Bernard of Quintavalle and his companion at Florence. They refused the alms, perhaps because it was a coin that they considered to be filthy and sinful in itself. More likely, if Bernard's words are clear, it was because they preferred to maintain themselves by some work without depriving the truly poor of anything, those who then were really in need.

The Friars Minor in the second half of the thirteenth century became gradually clericalized (which we will not examine now). In this process, they gradually entered into an already centuries-old Christian tradition: anyone dedicated to pastoral activity ought to be supported by the faithful he serves. Now, for the friars, personal and

community poverty remained total and firmly so. Yet they had become convinced, by the time that the *Legend of the Three Companions* and the second *Vita* by Thomas of Celano were written, that they should make their living through begging. This reality and point of view, we repeat, are reflected in our sources. We must add, however, that Francis' position and the form of life of his first brethren were quite distinct from later developments. They were supposed to maintain themselves by their work. Only in the case of a total lack of means to survive were they allowed to have recourse to the charity of others. This is confirmed by a crystal-clear passage from the *Testament,* which Francis wants to serve as a specific example for all the brethren: "I worked with my own hands and I am still determined to work; and with all my heart I want all the other friars to be busy with some kind of work (*laboritium*) that can be carried on without scandal." Here Francis' will is clear and explicit, both in regard to the past dating from his conversion and to the present. The only unavoidable and obvious condition is that the work be decent.

We have to remember that, in church teaching and public opinion of the thirteenth century, some works were considered to be morally improper (*"inhonesti"*) and thus prohibited to lay people and even more to men of the Church. The *viri poenitentiales* were included in the latter group in some respects, thus taking in the men of penance of the city of Assisi. Another point is also worth noting. Francis had a repugnance for money as minted metal, as an intermediate instrument of business. This feeling entailed a consequence that needs to be examined here, even though it did not take the form of any explicit prohibition in any "normative" document of the Friars Minor. The case often came about in the communal cities that churchmen, especially religious from some orders such as the *Umiliati,* were employed to direct or even administer the commune's finances. Now, it did not happen that any Friars Minor were ever called to positions of this sort. It is possible that to become *"camerarii"*—the

technical term for this civic post—was considered inappropriate for the dignity of a Friar Minor.

The dozen devoted companions around Francis declared themselves quickly in agreement with him on their conditions of living. These conditions began with prayer, work, poverty for oneself, availability to others to aid them in their spiritual and temporal needs. Further conditions involved living in the cities, frequenting churches, showing respect for priests, and giving exhortations sometimes in public, sometimes—as occasion arose—to individuals, using an intensive, flexible, and direct approach. And finally there was their awareness that something was ripening, that a slow but progressive change of general opinion was going on. Under these conditions, Francis revealed his intention of going to Rome to see the pope. His purpose was to gain a broader approbation, an authorization for action that would serve also as premise and support to expand the range and scope of their work of exhorting people to penance. The possibility cannot be excluded that, even though the sources say nothing about it, there were some objections raised by local ecclesiastical authorities, whether pastors or bishops. Before more serious difficulties could arise, it was necessary to face them and overcome them. That could be accomplished only at Rome. The entire brotherhood set out for the city.

V

Between Rome and Assisi

1 The first rule

The departure was preceded by an act that was its necessary and indispensable premise. Francis, the former businessman, and Peter Cattani, apparently the clerical expert in canon law, fully realized that it was not possible for them to approach the pontiff and seek approval of their model of living according to the gospel without a written formulation of their intention. They had to draw up a rule and present it to the pope for him to examine and, eventually, confirm.

The *Testament* tells us about this first rule, as usual in summary style, but also clearly and explicitly. After recounting how the Lord himself had revealed to him that he was to live according to the model of the gospel, Francis continues, "I had this written down briefly and simply and his holiness the pope confirmed it for me." He goes on to describe the way of life of the first brethren, as we shall see.

The words of the *Testament* show us clearly that it was not meant to be a text drawn up in accordance with customary formats, or along the lines of a formally conceived juridical document. The two terms used in the phrase, *paucis verbis et simpliciter* [briefly and simply], do not allow for any mistake concerning the brevity and the

formal aspect of the rule that they prepared for the pontiff. This matched the group's numerical size: it would have been inopportune, to say nothing of ridiculous, to have a solemn and complex rule. Nor should we be surprised that this text, at least as it was presented, has disappeared. Without hazarding any far-fetched hypotheses, we tend to the opinion that something of it remains in the first chapter of the rule *non bullata* (not confirmed with a bull), the rule of 1221. There a small group of gospel passages are collected, which correspond in part to the ones that Francis, Bernard, and Peter had drawn from the New Testament through the *sortes apostolorum*. We need not, however, ignore a point that is mentioned almost casually by the *Legend of the Three Companions*. We have to bear its importance in mind when we speak of versions of the rule: "He made and tried several rules before the last one which he left to his brothers." Thus, the final rule, which tradition distinguishes and characterizes as the *bullata*, is at the end of a series of attempts and experiences that were tested for their ability to fit the reality of practical living. This final rule should be the first one for us to talk about now. At any rate, to avoid any mistake, the final one is not to be confused with the earlier one called *non bullata*, which is indeed the *first* one to have its text come down to us.

At this point there is another detail to be placed in evidence, since it is bound closely to the very personality of the saint and makes clear a subsequent attitude. The decision had been made to go to Rome, and the small "fraternity" was getting ready. Francis proposed that they elect a leader who would guide them according to his own judgment. They all chose Brother Bernard. In this important fact, we can grasp the tendency that crops up repeatedly in Francis: he was permanently disposed to renounce any position of pre-eminence or command and freely ceded them to others. This kept him absolutely consistent with his basic purpose, with his choice of moving among outcast, poor, and derelict people. He had first made this choice while in a deep crisis of values. He

could not set it aside now to become leader of the group that had formed around him. In his first act that can be called official, he was faced with what would remain the agonizing dilemma of his whole life: how could he be, in line with his purpose and intention, an example of humility and of the acceptance of marginality for all, if he then accepted positions of authority and command? And yet how could he renounce coming forward and affirming his right of intervention and his position as the "inventor" of a new ideal? For it might become necessary to preserve the ideal at any cost, if he should see it imperiled by external circumstances or by people acting in good or bad faith.

It may seem that this in some way anticipates an attitude that Francis had in the more complex and difficult years that followed. To clear up this impression and confusion, which could well be justified, there is one decisive fact that emerged right after their arrival in Rome. There, in the presence of cardinals and the pope, it was not Bernard who acted as the leader, but Francis. The lively, impressive force of his faith, his passion for his ideal, the fervor of his spirit that poured out both in penance and in love for neighbor, all overcame the formal and extrinsic elements of an established hierarchy with brotherly concord. Yet they would not be enough to prevail over the onslaught of specific problems in living out their ideal.

Francis' mistrust toward (or deliberate ignorance of) juridical formulations appeared clearly during the compilation of their plan of life. He preferred to condense his decision and his norm of conduct into a few gospel passages. This mistrust was also his attitude toward institutional forms. As we shall gradually prove, he saw these forms as certainly necessary and indispensable, but always artificial and thus capable of being overruled when it was necessary. It was no accident that Bernard, elected head of the little community, in a sense vanished. Francis asserted himself in his stead and "regally" explained, as expressed by Dante Alighieri, his "firm intention" to Innocent III.

2 *Francis and Innocent III*

Innocent III, in the years 1209 and 1210, was in one of the most intricate and difficult periods of his pontificate, both on political and religious levels. The little community undertook its journey to Rome during this time. The pope had lived through the bitter and disappointing experience of the fourth crusade. The faithful had assembled to liberate Jerusalem, seized by Saladin twenty years earlier and not recovered by the third crusade. The crusaders were induced by the astute maneuvering of Venice to conquer Zara, then to occupy the Byzantine Empire, and divide it among themselves. This disappointment was not counterbalanced for the pope by the union of the Eastern Church with the Western Church, since, with his precise knowledge of the question, he realized how fragile the union was.

An even greater source of worry for him was Germany, with the fierce struggle for the imperial succession. On the one side were the supporters of the Swabian house of Frederick Barbarossa and Henry VI; their candidate was Frederick, the other son of Philip of Swabia. On the other side were the supporters of the son of Henry the Lion, Otto of Brunswick. During the long quarrel that had bitterly divided Germany, Innocent had surely played a determining role in many ways. Yet he could not help but be aware that more than once he had been used by one or another of the two contenders, instead of controlling the situation himself. Neither Philip nor Otto had won him over totally, since, without doubt, they were much more preoccupied with their own interests than they were with church matters. The matter was finally resolved when Philip, in a private vendetta, was assassinated on June 21, 1208, by Otto of Wittelsbach, a Bavarian count palatine. Otto, the other candidate for the imperial throne, had received papal recognition after making a new solemn promise to obey the Church. He came to Italy in order to be solemnly crowned as emperor. Right afterward, however, in violation of his prior commitments and completely against Innocent's will, he decided to attack the kingdom

of Sicily. There the fourteen-year-old Frederick Roger, the future Frederick II, was already king.

It is worth noting that, amid these events, Otto had come to Umbria two different times, staying at Assisi between December 1209 and January 1210. It seems likely, however, that the episode that the first *Vita* by Thomas of Celano recounts occurred somewhat earlier, that is, in September 1209. When Otto made his way with great pomp through the environs of Rivo Torto—where, as we mentioned earlier, Francis had stayed with his companions for a while—he did not draw the least sign of respect. Only one of the brethren was sent out to the future emperor, in order to tell him that his earthly glory would be of short duration. It is probable that Francis left for Rome after the imperial coronation (October 4, 1209), thus in the spring of 1210. He arrived there just at the time when doubts were thickening with regard to the new sovereign's loyalty and obedience. It was, to be sure, not a serene time on the political level, any more than it was on the religious level.

Serious worries were also stemming from southern France. The two heresies that we discussed earlier, the Waldensian and the Catharist, found a broad area for development, even though they fought between themselves. The Waldensians even had advocates within the clergy, as seen in the cases of Durando of Huesca and Bernard Prim. The Cathars found favor among the people and even more among the upper and lower nobility. At first the pontiff sent out a call in vain for able, convincing preachers of holy life. Then, providentially, a canon of the cathedral of Osma in Castile, Dominic Guzmán, came to Rome accompanying his bishop. Dominic had been shocked by the conditions he had discovered in the territories he had passed through in southern France. He approached the pope for permission to preach against the heretics there. He proceeded to assemble a small group of preachers—all were clerics, and most were priests—and gained with them their first successes. They instituted the religious order that was to be called the Order of

Preachers, i.e., the Dominicans. They achieved brilliant results, such as the conversion of the Cathar women banded together in the heretical monastery of Prouille. They also brought back to the bosom of the Church the priest Durando of Huesca and a conspicuous group of Waldensians, after a memorable debate. Without confusing themselves with the "preachers" of Dominic, this group took part effectively in the polemic against the two heretical movements with great energy, but above all with an exact and precise knowledge of local situations. Innocent III, in this situation, had known enough to give evidence of his understanding and feeling for the circumstances which, for that period, can be rated as exceptional. He personally met with Durando and manifested his understanding and appreciation of the demands of the poverty-oriented piety that Durando had advocated in the name of himself and his companions. The pope not only approved the demands but even defended them when Durando returned home and faced not a few difficulties. Durando's community of "Catholic poor" had had its right to exist acknowledged, despite the opposition of some bishops who continued to find Waldensian tendencies in Durando's positions. Bernard Prim went through much the same thing.

The attitude of Innocent III should cause no surprise. He had long since been giving evidence many times of his capacity to grasp and understand popular phenomena. In him this is all the more remarkable if we think of the development of his own personal culture: it was typically "archaic," or better yet, high medieval, as can be seen in his works *De miseria humanae conditionis* [On the misery of the human condition] or *De sacrificio missae* [The sacrifice of the Mass]. It is known that he supported the Milanese *Umiliati* and freed them from all suspicion of heresy, yet some of this suspicion had been justified at one time. His capacity to grasp new movements, however, did not prevent him from opening the way for their more specific and organic insertion into the institutional reality of the Church. This was aided by an initial, then progressive

and continuous "clericalization" of the given movement. This phenomenon is still not totally clear or precisely traced in all its aspects and development. Only in recent years have historians given some attention to it. Yet some of the fundamental and specific aspects can be identified. Innocent III and his successors would accept, protect, and defend these spontaneous movements, normally formed by lay people, that were not opposed to the clergy but often had clerical support. Then the papacy would try above all to propose, if not impose, a norm of life and a firm juridical rule. By this means the direction, organization, and structure of the movement would become controlled by clergy or directly entrusted to them. This was the process with the *Umiliati*, which made reconiliation easier for Durando of Huesca and Bernard Prim, since, after all, they were priests.

In the course of this account we will gradually see how the same directive policy exercised over these movements was also employed with Francis and his *fraternitas*. It was an extremely significant complex of action and reaction. From it, however, would spring a deep tension between the need for regulation and the spiritual impulse. The tension became greater in step with the growing success of the Franciscan movement.

Before discussing the encounter between Innocent III and Francis, it is necessary to examine what was, in the spring of 1210, the most serious problem that weighed upon the pontiff: the crusade against the Albigenses and its consequences. Its origins are well known. The Cathars of France or, as they called themselves, the Albigenses, had undergone a menacing expansion thanks to the support of lay lords. One overt protector of heretics was Esclarmonde, the sister of one of the largest landholders bordering the Pyrenees, the count of Foix. Others did the same with greater or lesser discretion. In this light, one can well imagine how this disturbed the pope. Another among the leaders who protected the heresy was even the count of Toulouse, Raymond VI. Like so many other nobles of the region, he was not personally a heretic, but

he did nothing to prevent the fervid activity of anyone—whether Cathars or Waldensians—who preached against the Catholic Church. On that account, the pope had sent to him one of his legates, Peter of Castelnau, a cleric of that region (he was archdeacon at Maguelonne). Peter was well appraised of the local situation and of the difficulties that stemmed from it. While complex negotiations were in progress to get Raymond to take away all favors from the Cathars, one of the count's squires assassinated the papal legate. He thought (or at least said) that the deed would be welcomed by his lord. In those times, this was a crime of unsurpassed gravity. A legate was regarded virtually as an alter ego of the pontiff, who saw himself compelled to intervene when a threat materialized. The pontiff was present in his letters that called for a crusade in Christian territory against the heretics. The event of the murder did not prove to be very disturbing. The king of France, Philip II Augustus, in the spring of 1200, was much more preoccupied with the struggle in Germany between Philip of Swabia and Otto of Brunswick. He feared that serious consequences could ensue for the French state. A related factor was that Otto was the cousin and ally of King John of England. John, with his fiefs of Aquitaine and Normandy, was one of the two lions that gnawed at the kingdom of France, according to the vivid phrase of Philip II Augustus. The other lion was Emperor Otto himself.

A military expedition was finally assembled in Lyon. Large and well-commanded, it moved quickly, since it had to settle everything within the forty days or slightly more than were provided for vassals to satisfy the duty of military aid to their lords. Key cities were conquered by military terror, including Béziers and Carcassonne. Above all, Raymond Roger Trencavel, viscount of Albi and Béziers, was deposed. When the army was disbanded to allow each lord to return home, Simon de Montfort remained with a handful of men to defend the territories occupied by the crusade. He was a vassal without much land. With a courage that seemed rash, he had agreed to

take over the viscounty of Albi-Béziers itself, knowing full well that, once the forces of the expedition had departed, he would have to compete with all the lords in the south. Most of them had kept their positions and were looking for revenge, starting with the count of Toulouse. This insecurity generated serious worry for the pope. The matter weighed even more heavily upon him owing to his specific awareness that the massacres, killings, and fear had caused the heretics only to hide, not to disappear. This fact made the work even more difficult and complex for the missioners sent in to convert the heretics. Earlier, the heretics were out in the open and voluntarily engaged in public debates. Now the missioners had to search for them and uncover them, since the heretics had gone underground. All this is not difficult to imagine, even though it is not easy to pinpoint the time of its development from the documentation available to us.

Such were the problems of Innocent III when Francis and his companions arrived at Rome. It was not in their favor that they came from Assisi. Their city was divided by internal quarrels between nobles and people. Yet it also resisted any attempt by Innocent to take authority over the city within the framework of the policy of "recuperation," as mentioned above.

It was no easy thing, then, to reach the pope. Although the Roman curia at the beginning of the thirteenth century had not yet evolved into its complexity and organization of later centuries, it was still an organism within which the pope was the ranking personage. One could reach him only by passing through a series of intermediate steps, the most important one being occupied by cardinals. We may not choose to accept totally the accusations of St. Bernard in *De consideratione* or in other accounts, more or less colored, of the difficulty of getting Rome to approve an action even of small importance. Still, the general impression that remains is of difficulty of access, especially if one needed to go all the way to the pope.

The barrier maintained by the cardinals was especially hard. Various questions were entrusted to them because

of their specific competences, because of custom or their familiarity with some problems, or, finally, because of the personal interest they might have in different matters. Thus popular movements seem to have been dealt with by some cardinals rather than by others, for what seem to be especially personal reasons. Cardinal John of St. Paul, bishop of Sabina, had considered and discussed the return of Durando of Huesca to the Church's fold, and had supported his requests and upheld his demands in the presence of other cardinals and the pope himself. On that occasion Durando had aroused the interest and attention of still another cardinal, Leo of Brancaleone, titular of Holy Cross in Jerusalem. Durando, later pointedly dedicated his book *Liber Antiheresis* [Book against Heresy] to the cardinal.

It was with these cardinals, especially John of St. Paul, that Francis established rapport. Their intermediary was none other than Bishop Guido of Assisi; on this detail the two *Vitae* of Thomas and the *Legend of the Three Companions* are in perfect accord. Guido did not conceal his own surprise and disappointment. His overt reason was that they all might leave Assisi. His undeclared but truer reason was that they might withdraw from his sole and personal jurisdiction. At any rate, he commended the group to Cardinal John. John, of course, made every effort to induce them to enter any one of the four approved orders. This was in line with curial policy and would be prescribed some years later by the Fourth Lateran Council. No need to repeat here the reasons why he ran into their lively resistance: to enter one of the four already approved orders meant, to Francis and his confreres, renouncing all the profound and living reasons for their own "conversion."

At this point, the cardinal must have realized that the decision was exceeding his normal competence. He wanted to discuss it now personally with the pope. This led to the meeting between Innocent III and Francis. Unfortunately, we are badly informed about these events in Rome and in particular about this meeting. This is not

because the data are sparse, but precisely because they are too rich with details colored by legend. In some accounts, the function and importance of the pontiff's intervention is exalted. In others, more emphasis is given to the providential nature of the saint's action and personality. The entire course of events is thus transposed into a supernatural atmosphere, within which we have to find the dimensions of reality. We will be examining each source individually for legendary elements. All of them, however, present this encounter as influenced by their knowledge of the later development and unfolding of the Order of Friars Minor. From one angle, then, emphasis is laid on Francis' candor or even boldness—not a word is heard about his companions or about Bernard, the head of the little group—in the presence of the pontiff. From another angle, the pope is shown as seized by a virtually religious respect in facing an apparition at the border of the divine.

They were, indeed, two of the greatest personalities of their time. The converted merchant was humble but decisive, clear, and aware in his aims. The pope was attentive, as few others were, to his responsibilities as guide for the souls that God had entrusted to him and conscious of his supreme power. It is indeed possible that the meeting of these two great figures produced moments of high drama or exceptional tension. However, it does not seem probable that the two actually made the speeches contained in the sources. None of the sources speaks of its information as received from someone close to the pontiff or of confidences from Francis. Distant in time from the events, accounts abound with details rife with extraordinary occurrences. One example would be the dream about the collapsing basilica of St. John Lateran; this dream has been mentioned also in relation to St. Dominic. Another would be the story of the children of the woman and the king; the folkloric origin of this story is patent. It is doubtful that it could have been told by Francis to the pope.

Certainly the fact remains—and it is of no small

importance—as recorded in the *Testament*: "His holiness the pope confirmed it for me," referring to his plan of life according to the gospel model. This firmly excludes that the approbation came from any authority of lesser rank. Thus the meeting with the pope really took place, but the approbation was nothing more than a simple verbal one. This point alone is enough to show us the practical limits of the enthusiasm and consent of Innocent III. We can better specify the meaning of his decision by noting that it seems to have been engendered by his deep worry over the situation of the Church on the religious level. It meant that any initiative that supported the Church was welcome. Innocent was especially glad for the group's connection with a city that was particularly important by reason of its political position in the framework of "papal *recuperationes*." It was during those very months in Assisi that the decisive round was being played between *maiores* and *minores*, between nobility and people. The process was to bring about peace on November 9, 1210, which was fundamental for the further development of the commune's political reality.

Another factor in Innocent's decision was that Francis' request, although in some respects out of the ordinary, did not go beyond the fundamental directives of canon law. He wanted only to be able to follow the evangelical counsels in their entirety, just as they had really been lived by Christ and the apostles, according to the accounts in the Gospels. This was hard to carry out—and Francis was certainly warned of that—but it was canonically acceptable. Nor were there any problems over preaching; it was to remain within the limits of penitential preaching and exhortation to conversion and to renunciation of sin. Their preaching's power would be reinforced by the example of their lives, and they would encourage meditation to integrate, complement, and clarify their words, as provided for by canonical norms.

Everything that we have outlined here seems to be completely confirmed in the first *Vita* by Thomas of Celano. This account was written at the request of Pope

Gregory IX and was concerned with stressing the importance of the role of the pope in approving the proposal/rule of Francis. Innocent III's action and intervention would serve as an opportune and useful basis for the kind of influence over the friars that Gregory IX wanted to exercise. This *Vita* starts with the usual flowery literary fervor, and then tells about the presence of Bishop Guido in Rome and about the action of Cardinal John of St. Paul. However, it limits the intervention of Innocent III to a series of official deeds and exhortations, perhaps warm and cordial for reasons mentioned earlier, but not to any unusual extent. The *Vita* describes a personal meeting (which need not be ruled out), attention to their requests with subsequent approval, a hortatory discourse, benediction upon the small group, and, finally, words of parting and encouragement: "Go with the Lord, dear brothers," the pope is recorded as saying, "and since the Lord will deign to inspire you, preach penance to everyone. Once the Lord has caused you to multiply in numbers and in grace, tell me of your joy; and I will grant you more things than I can now; and I will entrust to you greater tasks with greater confidence." The only extraordinary element was a dream, not of the pope, but of Francis, who dreamed that there was a beautiful, strong, large, and very tall tree. He himself rose to such a height as to touch the top of the tree and to bend it down to the ground. This was the case with the pope who, while being the highest among the powers in the world, had bent down to listen and to approve everything set out to him by Francis and his confreres.

We have no other account available to us on this Roman episode that goes back to the period falling between 1228 and 1246-1248, when the two successive accounts of the *Legend of the Three Companions* and the second *Vitae* of Thomas of Celano were written. It seems that the second *Vitae* is based either upon the *Legend* or upon a source common to both of them. The artificial character of the accounts, with their selection of effects and accumulative detail, seems hard to argue against. If we are dealing with

someone (but with whom?) who evokes the past with some enlargement, it is someone who prefers "poetry" over "truth." Two points confirm this. One is general in nature, whereby the presence of Francis in Rome and his meeting with the pontiff become the only matters of importance at that moment. It is as if Innocent III had nothing else to do or think about, while in fact he was in one of the most difficult and complex junctures of his seventeen-year pontificate. The other point is more specific in nature and focus: it is the insertion of dreams that are not generally symbolic, such as Francis' dream in the first *Vita* by Thomas, but that are clearly prophetic. A complication lies in the fact that the very same prophetic dream, is attributed to St. Dominic by his biographers. Finally, there is the recourse to popular storytelling form, however, elevated in meaning and in symbolic importance.

As regards the prophetic dream, it is well known that it cannot be determined whether the dream of St. Dominic or that of St. Francis came first. At best, we can think of the dream as having proceeded from the activity that both conducted in the Church and that each order wanted to attribute the dream to its own founder. We cannot, then, speak of this dream as being historically accurate in either case. Nor can we attribute more value to the story/parable that Francis is alleged to have told to Innocent III. We have to resist the suggestion of some informal chat with brotherly confidence taking place between the saint, with his lively, image-filled idiom, and the pope, momentarily extending himself in rapt attention.

We need, then, the courage to give up knowing more, i.e., to inquire more closely on how this string of reports ever developed. Nevertheless their importance proved to be immense for the later shaping of the traditional images of the "myth" of Francis himself. This we can assert without hesitation or fear of error. Later on, this image was systematized by St. Bonaventure in his *Legenda maior* on the level of theology of history.

The *Legend of the Three Companions* is followed in its

essential lines by the second *Vita* by Thomas, with mainly corrective literary variations. The *Legend,* in its turn using elements from the first *Vita* by Thomas, tells of Bishop Guido's being present in Rome and of the meeting with Cardinal John of St. Paul. Yet it promptly embellishes the story by adding on a meeting between the cardinal and the pope that incorporates an encomium of Francis that is also laced with prophecy. It will be helpful to quote it here in order to get an idea of the narrative's general tone: "I have found a most excellent man," Cardinal John is supposed to have said, "who desires to live according to the form of the gospel and in everything to observe evangelical perfection. I am convinced that through this man our Lord wills to renew the faith of Holy Church in the whole world." We do not have to belabor the impossibility of this discourse occurring then. Some of the specific phrases—e.g., "to live according to the form of the gospel," "to observe evangelical perfection," "*in toto mundo fidem sancte ecclesie reformare* [to renew the faith of Holy Church in the whole world]"—are conceivable only after both the saint himself as well as the entire Order of Friars Minor had fully developed their religious work and had carried out pastoral ministry.

However, still according to the *Legend* (and Thomas' second *Vita*) the pope wanted to receive Francis and his companions. He exhorted them and blessed them (details taken from the first *Vita* by Thomas). Yet one of the general admonitions spoken of by Thomas in his first *Vita* is now further developed. "My sons," the pope is presented as saying, "your plan of life seems too hard and rough. We are convinced of your fervor, but we have to consider those who will follow you in the future, and who may find that this path is too harsh." The pope received assurance from those present about their plan for which they did not want to diminish their determination in the least. Then he supposedly spoke personally to Francis: "My son, go and pray to God that he may reveal whether what you ask proceeds indeed from his most holy will: and this in order that We may be assured that in

granting your desire We shall be following the will of God."

This entreaty to prayer by the pope gave the saint occasion for a revelation that took the form of a folk tale. We will take the text from the *Legend of the Three Companions*: "A poor and beautiful maiden lived in a desert; and a king, seeing her beauty, took her as his bride since he was sure she would bear him splendid sons. The marriage contract was drawn up and the marriage consummated and many sons were born. When they grew up, their mother said to them: 'My children, do not be fearful and diffident, for your father is a king. Go, therefore, to his court, and he will give you all you need.' When the king saw these children, he marveled at their beauty; and recognizing their likeness to himself, he said: 'Whose sons are you?' They answered that they were the children of a poor woman who lived in the desert, upon which the king embraced them joyfully saying. 'Fear nothing, for you are my children; and seeing how many strangers eat at my table, you who are my lawful sons will do so with far greater right.' He embraced them joyfully and decreed that all his children by the woman of the desert should be summoned to his court and there be provided for." Francis had grasped that the woman symbolized himself and explained it in this way when he retold the dream to the pope (again, following the text of the *Legend*): "I am that poor woman whom God in his mercy has loved and honored, and through whom he has begotten legitimate children. The king of kings himself has told me that he will provide for all the sons he wills to raise up through me; for if he cares for strangers, he will also do so for his own children. Since God, in his loving providence toward all mankind, gives so many good things of the earth to the unworthy and to sinners, in far greater measure will he provide for evangelical men who deserve his favor."

The pope, again according to the *Legend*, was greatly amazed, partly because he had had a vision before the arrival of Francis (which some biographers mention in connection with Dominic). In the vision, the pope had

seen that the church of St. John Lateran was threatened with collapse and that a religious man, small and insignificant, propped it up. A few days afterward, Innocent III is said to have grasped the exact meaning of this strange dream when Francis came to him in order to seek approval for his proposal/rule, based on gospel passages. He then is said to have thought, "This is surely a holy and religious man by whom the Church of God will be supported and upheld." He then embraced Francis, approved the rule he had presented, and gave him authorization to preach penance (on this point all sources agree). Later, he made the approval complete in a consistory.

In his turn, Francis—once again, according to the *Legend*—gave thanks on his knees to God; he then promised to the pope obedience, humble reverence, and devotion, and was followed in this act by all his confreres. Blessed by the pope, they made all the devotional visits normally associated with a journey to Rome. Before leaving, they received the tonsure by arrangement of Cardinal John of St. Paul, "who wished them all to have the clerical tonsure."

The greater part of this account, both in the *Legend of the Three Companions* and in the second *Vita* by Thomas can be regarded as an elaboration of the few original pieces of certain information. The account was formulated in the light of what happened afterward, re-echoing motifs of popular piety and even of a theology of history. Aware of this, we still ought to discuss, however briefly, the matter of the tonsure that Francis and his companions are said to have received before they left Rome. The point is important and specific for the purpose of understanding Francis' plan in its entirety, before and after his journey to Rome. In this connection, it is worth noting that the second *Vita* by Thomas of Celano, in the corresponding part of his account, does not speak of tonsure, unlike the report contained in the *Legend of the Three Companions*. However, there was one point in Francis' life, not specified by Thomas, where the tonsure in one incident was taken in its specific sense: as he was having his hair cut, he remarked that he did not want a large "corona," (i.e., a

broad tonsure) to set him apart from his other confreres. With this style, he would be closer to those who did not have the tonsure.

From this body of data, it seems to us that we can deduce that the *Legend* places at the point of their departure from Rome an event that probably took place at a later time (or so we may cautiously hypothesize). Francis was carrying authority as head of the new *religio* of Friars Minor, and the number of friars was increasing. A point of no small interest was that many of them were clerics and even priests. It must have seemed inappropriate for a layman, which Francis was at that point, to exert an authority that demanded total obedience from clerics and even priests. By conferring a minimum of sacred status upon Francis, a canonical difficulty of some degree was overcome. The importance of the founder in his community was thereby highlighted and confirmed.

Accepting the validity of what we have thus far examined, we see a consequence that has great value for interpreting the juridical reality and the canonical condition of Francis and his companions. Theirs is a free "fraternity"—*fraternitas* is the term that the saint used perhaps most willingly—of laymen and clerics. Accepted by the Church in the category of *viri poenitentiales*, they chose in reality to place themselves on the edge of society. They accepted a share in the lot of rejects and lepers, giving them all their support. With the poor they shared the fruits of their labor, if any, or of their begging. They always bore in mind that their voluntary poverty obliged them to care for the truly poor and needy, before attending to their own needs.

3 Return to Assisi. Life of the Friars.

The return home was a happy one, with some pauses and detours. They wanted to be able at last, with full right and without external difficulties, to exercise their function as preachers of penance and as examples of religious life. This was what they had set out to do, and had been the reason for their journey to Rome. They established

themselves at Rivo Torto, but not without serious space problems. They had to resolve them, sometimes in the face of unforeseen events of various kinds. Some problems occurred with their rural neighbors, as we see in the episode of the peasant who wanted to stable his donkey in the cabin they were occupying. This was enough to lead them to go back to the tiny church of St. Mary of the Portiuncula. It belonged then to the Benedictine monks of Subasio.

There is a specific characteristic of this early Franciscanism that we find in full function whether during their stay at Rivo Torto or at the Portiuncula, already at the time of their trip to Rome and immediately after their return. Without any doubt, we must trace this characteristic back to Francis himself; we see it working in him right from the point of his withdrawal from the world. It is a singular co-presence and coexistence of contemplative life along with participation in the daily life of society. Even though his first attempt at eremitical life was set aside in the light of gospel words and life, Francis nevertheless continued to value silence, recollection, and meditation upon Christ and his passion. Their day, then, was dedicated for the most part to work and to preaching penance and Christian living to their brothers and sisters in the world, in civil society. After having satisfied, as far as possible, their hunger, whatever time was left to them, was then given over to contemplation. We will have occasion to point out in this regard the specific characteristics intended to make possible these two levels of religious life. They would reside in isolated and tranquil places, even if they were uncomfortable or barely accessible. At the same time, their houses were to be not too far—more or less an hour's walk—from town, which in their early days was Assisi. The choice of Rivo Torto and the Portiuncula, by no means casually made, was conscious and deliberate. The choices fully met the two requirements, although the episode with the donkey easily explains their move to the area around the Portiuncula. This representation of the primitive ambience of Francis'

life is neither arbitrary nor fabricated. Proof of this is that it lasted up until the time when Jacques de Vitry saw the Friars Minor in 1216 and described them in a famous letter, which we will examine in due time.

These early times produced some edifying episodes, yet one cannot vouch for their historicity. It is much safer to review Francis' own memories as contained in his *Testament.* He states, after speaking of the papal approbation: "His holiness the pope confirmed [the proposal of a way of life] for me. Those who embraced this life gave everything they had to the poor. They were satisfied with one habit which was patched inside and outside and a cord and trousers. We refused to have anything more.

"Those of us who were clerics said the office like other clerics, while the lay brothers said the *Our Father;* and we were only too glad to find shelter in abandoned churches. We made no claim to learning and we were submissive to everyone. I worked with my own hands and I am still determined to work; and with all my heart I want all the other friars to be busy with some kind of work that can be carried on without scandal. Those who do not know how to work should learn, not because they want to get something for their efforts, but to give good example and to avoid idleness. When we receive no recompense for our work, we can turn to God's table and beg alms from door to door. God revealed a form of greeting to me, telling me that we should say, 'God give you peace.'

"The friars must be very careful not to accept churches or poor dwellings for themselves, or anything else built for them, unless they are in harmony with the poverty which we have promised in the rule; and they should occupy these places only as strangers and pilgrims.

"In virtue of obedience, I strictly forbid the friars, wherever they may be, to petition the Roman curia, either personally or through an intermediary, for a papal brief, whether it concerns a church or any other place or even in order to preach or because they are being persecuted. If they are not welcome somewhere [and thus are denied permission to talk there], they should flee to another country where they can lead a life of penance, with God's blessing."

This passage is of exceptional importance, because it illustrates a very delicate balance. On one hand is the memory of sixteen years earlier, a rather long time past. The memory was still clear in Francis' mind, especially in view of the fact that Francis died at an age when memory is still fresh and lively. On the other hand was the difficult present, rife with many problems that were cropping up around him. He foresaw that they would give his successors even greater worry. He faced confidently the task of recovering the simple, severe, but happy life of his early *fraternitas.* Yet he also related it all to his last days, as if in ideal comparison.

Because of its clarity, this passage from the *Testament* does not require any special analysis to illustrate it or examine its impact. Still, there are some elements that deserve close attention. The first element concerns the total and complete poverty of the members of the *fraternitas.* In order to join, each one had to distribute to the poor all that he possessed, so as to achieve a level of indigence, not only individually, but also for all the friars. Needless to say, nothing was reserved or handed over to the community. To join also meant to accept the way of life, i.e., the condition of being outcasts with respect to the rest of society. This was the condition that Francis had chosen after his encounter with the leper. He had been able to refine and clarify his choice on the basis of his reading of the gospel; he then had the proposal/rule written, and later approved by the pope. The external sign of this social change—which had exact and established importance in the Middle Ages—was especially the habit. The gospel had provided that the apostle ought not to have two habits for his trip, no traveling bag or anything else. Francis and his brethren were content with one tunic. We have to understand the term as designating a very simple garment, made up of two pieces of cloth roughly cut to the body's dimension. It had a hint of sleeves, with the two pieces sewn together. It was put on

by drawing it over the head. Francis did not need to specify that they ought to use unpretentious cloth. They probably used the one produced by the *Umiliati*. Its color, as they spoke of it then, was *"berettino"* a kind of earth-gray. It was made of wool that was neither dyed nor sorted nor easy on bare skin, as is evident from many stories. One of those we have already heard, concerning the pair that despoiled a friar of his tunic; upon seeing that he was naked underneath, they had enough pity to give it back to him. We cannot fail to note as well that this rough tunic was not changed when it became worn, since it was the only one allotted to any individual; it was mended both outside and inside. This must have remained the lifelong practice at least for Francis, judging by the episode found in the *Compilation of Assisi (Legenda Perusina)*. There the remembrances are collected of the group of companions who stayed with the saint during the last period of his life; they are included in the phrase, *"Nos qui cum eo fuimus"* ["we who were with him"]. At that time Francis was in the hermitage of St. Eleutherius near Rieti, where the temperature was cold. "Since he was extremely cold, he was obliged to line the inside of his habit; so did his companion. His body felt some relief from this." To his companion he remarked—this was toward the end of his life—that even in regard to poverty in habit he had to remain an example for his confreres. He stressed his personal responsibility, which he took very seriously. We will see more on this later.

Around the waist a cord was worn that had taken the place of the belt worn by hermits. It showed once again, as an external symbol obvious to everybody, their status as penitents; drawers were then added underneath. No one wanted any more. We should realize the effectiveness of this way of dressing and appreciate the difference between it and the way other religious communities dressed. Some illustrative episodes will help. Reinhold of Dassel, a canon of Hildesheim, later chancellor under Frederick Barbarossa, at a diocesan council was unwilling to give up the furs that adorned his habit and kept him

warm. Another, if less specific episode, is that of the polemic between Peter the Venerable and St. Bernard. Bernard reproached the Cluniacs for using woolen cloths and furs to protect themselves against the cold. There may be an element of nostalgia if not of complaint and polemic in the remark, "We refused to have anything more." When Francis wrote these words, the old *fraternitas* had become already an order of thousands of people. Among them there must have been some who complained about the humble habit that was unpleasant to look at since it was shabby. This remark in the *Testament* is an implicit recall to that time that was being felt not only as distant but, regrettably, as beyond repetition, namely, when the condition of wretched external appearance was enough to satisfy them, when the habit was deliberately intended to bring out their status of being outcasts and rejects of society. Anyone who wore it, then, was content and wanted nothing more; one had chosen the condition made evident by the habit.

Francis' remembrance is not limited to the habit alone, but includes other aspects of religious life and social activity as well. First among these is prayer, regarding which he points out that he and all who were clerics said the office, while the lay members recited the Our Father. Having examined the matter of the saint's tonsure, it is hardly necessary to repeat that, from that point onward, he recited the office like all clerics, within whose ranks he was counted. His participation in the office and the rest of the Church's liturgical life helps us to understand and identify more than one point: the office recited by Francis himself and his confreres was that of the church of Rome. They spread its use and reinforced its importance. One should note as well that it was the daily reading of the office, along with the remaining liturgy of the Mass and the other sacred functions that served greatly to provide a modest theological and scriptural education both for the saint and for his companions. He had received a rudimentary education that would be adequate for a merchant, and little more: reading and writing, both in

the vernacular and in Latin, and arithmetic. Now he had to broaden his knowledge to include, on an elementary level, something of sacred Scripture and liturgy. This was to enable him to take part with the understanding and involvement that matched Francis' fervor and intensity of feeling. Just as the young merchant was feeling more and more, by virtue of a deep and significant interior evolution, the validity and duty of his status as an outcast, so also as a cleric he saw his mercantile education converting to a cleric's education.

At this point, we cannot neglect to point out how Francis maintained a profound distrust toward one aspect of ecclesiastical education, almost to the point of actual hostility. This distrust was active from the time of his conversion right up to the time of the *Testament,* with a continuity that knew no second thoughts, hesitation, or interruption. The aspect in question was the possibility, by means of distinctions and with the more-or-less able help of allegories, to "interpret" texts, so as to distort them and, sometimes, to reverse the original meaning. Not unlike other religious movements of his time, whether orthodox or not, Francis expressed his distrust toward this approach without hesitation or minced words. He reconfirmed this attitude in his last testament when he explicitly prohibited comment upon the rule under pretext of explaining the meaning better.

Throughout his life and in all his deeds, Francis, in fact, remained firm in his conviction that words were always to be understood in their literal sense, in their most obvious and simple meaning. This, for him, applied as well to the words of sacred Scripture. For centuries much talent had been devoted to allegorical interpretations of every sort in order to draw from them the four senses that could be found in them. It is not possible for us to say whether Francis' posture on interpretation stemmed from a generalized distrust on the part of the popular consciousness, especially with regard to matters of religion, or from his individual experience as a merchant; in that period he had to watch his words in the conduct of business to

avoid confusion and deception. At any rate, it is necessary to put into the proper light and to weigh the importance of this aspect of Francis' personality; he had a deep and delicate sensitivity to the real, concrete value of words as expressions of thought, rich as well in shades of meaning, and yet precise in their (to use a current term) semantic value. Let us look at a couple of examples of his language. Poverty is the condition of true indigence; work is work with the hands. Now, a connection has been drawn between the word *laboritium* in the *Testament* and the word *lavoreccio* that still is used in the dialect of Assisi; and that means a day's labor as each day arrives. If this connection is accurate, then the dialect term confirms the search for the exact meaning to help avoid confusion or mistake.

From what has been said so far, we can proceed to note how this demand for adherence to the literal sense of words and expressions helps us to understand and appreciate better what is often spoken of as Francis' indifference or scorn toward studies. This point is especially relevant in the light of Francis' ideal evocation of the early life of the *fraternitas* as compared with its later development. At the root of this widespread opinion about Francis' attitude toward study there lies a great misunderstanding. Without doubt, it is true that, in this splendid, nostalgic evocation of his community's past, the saint does not speak of study or education. Indeed, there was no place for such activity on the part of anyone who had chosen his social standing among outcasts. Forsaking education turned out to be the equivalent, on another level, of forsaking earthly goods or one's original economic activity and condition. However, there is a great difference between forsaking something and scorning it. Proof of this, it would seem, is found in the fact that, while proposing to be an outcast, Francis does not become a rogue. In and through poverty he wants to introduce an element of elevation and consolation, of overcoming one's misery. Thus he does not renounce what he already knows; he goes on speaking and singing in French. If a pauper's reality is one of misery, it is necessary to encourage him

and give him a new sense about his reality. Beyond it is the concern for theological and exegetical education. The reasons for this are worth sorting out, since they could give rise to difficulties, problems, and misunderstandings over Francis' basic intuition, over the essence of what we have called his fundamental option.

This aspect of Francis' outlook is perhaps worth examining more closely, because it implies the higher value that explains and justifies his conversion. After all that has been said, it is hardly necessary to emphasize that his conversion did not originate—even though it could have—from any rational and logical process, nor did it result from any intellectual journey that had stirred him and then "unchained" him. It arose from a real representation of the human condition on a level that by far is the lot of the majority of mankind. Their destiny of suffering and pain, however, is placed against the divine and consoling background of Christ crucified. This intuition is, for Francis, immediate and direct, and has no need of being explained or clarified. Education serves no purpose here; rather, it is the spontaneous drive and intense enthusiasm of one who, through the suffering of Christ, realizes the importance of the privilege of suffering (if it is not atrociously ironic to say so).

The young merchant, once converted, understood that all this could not be transmitted by words, but only by example and by sharing in a life experience. No theological, biblical, or juridical education could accomplish it. Only good example would do. Francis' desire was to be a good example in all his personal activity, in all his works, in his fervent search for true and complete poverty. Yet he still had the indelible awareness that "his" most rigorous poverty would never be the equal, neither in its psychological weight nor in its perceived harshness, of the poverty of someone who is poor not voluntarily, but poor by birth and by practical situation. For someone who is voluntarily poor, there is no humiliation as intense and profound as the poverty of someone born into misery and deprivation.

Let us pick up again with Francis' evocation of the community's early life: while the clerics recited the office, the lay brothers recited the Our Father. This is one more trait that Francis' movement has in common with others of his time. The emphasis on the Lord's Prayer is tightly connected with the revival of evangelical living, of which we spoke earlier. In the new *fraternitas* the prayer turned out to have an even greater meaning and importance than elsewhere: let us think simply but specifically of Francis' rebuff of Pietro Bernardone. In other movements the Our Father was important for being the prayer divinely taught and pronounced by Christ himself; among the Friars Minor, the event personally involving their founder made it into the prayer that, time after time, recalled and confirmed his total renunciation, but also offered them consolation. The Lord's Prayer must have come spontaneously from Francis' lips when he was still a layman; he thus kept for the nonclerical brethren its value as an invocation of their common Father, and as a way of facing the total renunciation they had carried out. We have to remember that there must have been a large number of lay brothers, especially in the early community, since the distinction between clerical and lay members emerges clearly in the remembrance expressed in the *Testament.* However, a significant characteristic of Francis' way of thinking makes itself quickly apparent. He has just set down a distinction that by its nature could in some way raise in the minds of those who read the *Testament* a particular doubt, or at least a possible opinion: that clerics, in some ways, even if only in prayer, are superior to laymen. With a psychological immediacy that ought not to be underestimated, Francis eliminates the doubt clearly and specifically: "*eramus omnes idiotae et subditi omnibus.*" There was, then, no distinction within the *fraternitas* between clerics and laymen. Whatever distinctions resulted were only extrinsic and formal, such as reciting the breviary or the Lord's Prayer; yet in relation to lay and church society they were inferior and submissive toward everyone. For Francis and all his brethren,

this involved the choice to take their place among outcasts, something we have discussed several times. It was for this reason that they felt themselves to be at the bottom of every social scale. Everyone else—and, it is important to point out, especially other "poor people"—was above them.

The interpretation of the term *idiota* is a difficult matter, because of its pregnant richness of meaning. Obviously, it has nothing to do with its current meaning. In the twelfth century, it was understood more in the sense of "lacking in culture." This applied above all to theological or general church culture, and it indicated an insurmountable inferiority, a great quality gap in relation to the clerical-monastic echelon. A classic example illustrating this, is a passage from St. Bernard. He gives not only the sense of the word but also the reaction that it provoked precisely in those who were not *idiotae*. Speaking of the heretics of his own age, Bernard says they are *idiotae prorsus et contemptibiles*, which can be approximately translated as "thoroughly ignorant and despicable." An association is thereby drawn, not only verbally but also concretely in the general context of the discourse, between a level of culture and social standing. The condition of *idiota* brought about, almost as a matter of course, the consequence of a condition of scorn. In the *Testament's* few words, in the short course of a sentence, there is a whole program of life and action. It is as if the saint is saying, "Clerical or nonclerical status, among us and in the eyes of the society in which we were active, made no difference in the fact that *all* of us presented ourselves as being ignorant and inferior to all others." We have already established that there was an ongoing bond in Francis between evocation/remembrance and the situation of the time when he was writing the *Testament*. In this bond we can discern both a lament and a warning. The lament is for the ideal condition of the past that was beyond repetition, just as the transformation of the present is irreversible. The warning is even more meaningful. When Francis wrote his last short work of farewell, he had already conceded to Anthony

of Lisbon (our St. Anthony of Padua) that some of the friars should study, with the condition that study not disturb their vocation and self-denial, to which they were already committed. The remembrance that the original *fraternitas* was composed of *idiotae* and *subditi omnibus* was intended to sound a warning for anyone liable to be led to pride and vainglory by their education. This message is confirmed by the continuation of the saint's reminiscence (all the more lively now, the more that the present situation seemed urgent) relative to work. In texts by Francis of Assisi, one must always be ready to evaluate every allusion, since he was writing to people who, in specific situations, were aware of aspects that are remote from us today. We have already pointed out the attitude of Francis toward work; in the context that we are exploring, it takes on even greater weight and clarity. The condition of laborer is tightly bound up with being *idiotae et subditi omnibus*, with the immediate qualification that it is a matter of manual labor. Past and present thus unite in an indivisible thread of continuity, as explained above. Since Francis worked at an earlier time when the brotherhood was small and made up of few people, he wanted to go on working right up to the end of his life, even with the sore and painful stigmata on his hands. However, among his brethren, who by now came from different social and geographic backgrounds, some were reluctant to engage in menial work, even though it was not improper for someone given over to penance. In reaction, Francis stated a clear admonishment and even an express command (*"precipio firmiter"* ["I firmly command"]) that was not open to mistaken interpretations. His firm command was that all the brethren should work in any way that was considered decent, such as field work or handicrafts; they were to avoid other improper forms of work such as that of a butcher or, even worse, a merchant or moneylender. Much less was anyone even to think of working as an executioner, tavern keeper, or juggler.

Anyone who did not know any trade was to learn one. The justification for this fits into the total framework that

Francis wanted for his community of brethren. This work was not to be done for the sake of pay for one's labor. One who had renounced everything ought not to think of pay out of *cupiditas,* [greed] but only as a means to procure the necessities of life. And what is the purpose of this work? Francis offers a twofold answer which in its simplicity overcomes the whole long monastic tradition with decisive clarity. In the first justification, of work as avoidance of idleness, there is complete identity with the Benedictine and monastic idea. This, however, is immediately surpassed by the second justification that, while not unknown in the culture that was Francis' context of reality, requires a new value that in some ways is highly significant: it is necessary to work in order to give good example. This places us unmistakably on a different basis than the monastic rationale. There the background was usually, if not exclusively, the fields; the term "work" was understood to mean only agriculture, or, later on, intellectual activity as well. Even though field work did not apply very much to Francis' brotherhood, it was supplanted by work in the city that was infinitely more varied, complex, and articulated, since production and trade activities were more widespread and subdivided in the cities. In this situation it could also happen that work would not be recompensed. It is interesting that this hypothesis is given greater consideration than the one that there would simply be no work; is it a recollection of what Francis had seen during his merchant period? The saint observes at this juncture that there is "the Lord's table," begging *ostiatim,* i.e., from door to door. This expression undoubtedly manifests the new awareness (which was taking on ever greater consistency, precision, and acceptance during the thirteenth century) of the rights of the poor. Even in their condition as people on the margin of society, they had specific rights over everyone who had anything "superfluous," anything that went beyond the minimum necessary for living. This did not exclude a measure of comfort, recognized as convenient and legitimate. What was left over, however, constituted

"the Lord's table"; Francis was no less clear on this point than on anything else. Providence had provided what was surplus for others, since it was made to reach those who were in real need. These alms, still according to Francis, were not obtained in the form of a donation to the community or to the place, as happened with the monasteries. Rather, it had to be asked for with humiliation, repeated time and time again, by knocking on one door after another as the truly poor have to do. We need to stress these points here, since they could seem to be small and even non essential. They confirm for us, however, Francis' profound intention. They also help us to avoid falling into what strikes us as a fundamental misunderstanding relative to his *conversio,* namely, that it was purely and simply a poverty-inspired deed. In fact, it is to be considered essentially as an upheaval of values, and not only economic values. More than that, it was the passage—if we may still insist upon the point—from one social condition to another. Renunciation of possessions is the premise of and the implicit condition in Francis' passage. Yet he is not so much concerned with this renunciation alone as he is with placing himself among those in a state of misery and on the margins of society, as was Christ. He is the example and the model always before Francis' eyes, functioning as a stimulus and uninterrupted force of action, drive, and ever-higher aspirations. Jesus Christ endures, then, as the indispensable given, as the ultimate and decisive reference point, continually returning in Francis as a living presence in every crucial juncture. Francis attributes to the Lord the grace of revealing to him that he must live according to the model of the gospel. He also repeats the salutation taught to him by the Lord: "The Lord grant you peace." Again we are looking at an initiative that is based on a long and rich tradition; Christianity presents itself as a force and feeling of fraternal peace for human beings right from the time of the early Church, where all were of one heart and one mind. With Francis, this tradition takes on specific relevance to his contemporary reality.

We noted earlier that the years between 1203 and 1210 were rich in political events, especially conflicts, in Assisi and throughout Italy. The conflicts often spilled over into actual armed combat between nobility and people or, as it was phrased in Francis' city, between *maiores* and *minores*. In this general disorder, peace was felt to be a supreme good, the highest that could be desired. Yet, unless we misunderstand the meaning of the greeting, it also has a less extrinsic and more profound level. The saint certainly was not lacking in sensitivity toward and awareness of the value of civil peace within the context of troubled urban life. Indeed, he himself had been in combat and had experienced the painful humiliation of imprisonment. Yet he also had another peace in mind when he dwelt on the *intus et foris*, [inside and outside]. While he longed for *exterior* peace among citizens, he could not help but think also of the other, *interior* peace. He had been able to experience it in some measure after he made his decisive choice. In the greeting there was implicit the highest degree that he could conceive, that of the soul attaining peace through rescue by God. All of his penitential preaching was oriented to that end.

Besides his admonitions on poverty, the duty of work, and the greeting inspired by God, he also gave a counsel. It referred more to the present, i.e., to the time of the *Testament*, than to the past. However, once again it reflected a continuity of attitude and a firm, specific fidelity to his ideal. The friars were content, and should continue to be contented, with poor churches and small houses, as prescribed by the rule. He then stressed again the interior condition, the state of mind that was needed for living in such poor abodes: they had to consider themselves as guests and pilgrims. The meaning of this, if we interpret it correctly, is found not simply in the sense of poverty and dispossession; it is found even more in the sense of provisionality and detachment, appropriate for someone on a journey who stops some place in order to rest, knowing full well that he cannot stay there forever, since others will come who might want to stop there also. Even in their

havens they ought to take into account the risk of tomorrow, the uneasiness of insecurity, the possibility of expulsion. The episode of Rivo Torto with the peasant and his ass sending them away embodies well that which Francis wanted to say in this part of the *Testament*. We will return to this topic soon.

4 Differences between Francis and Dominic

For our interpretation of Francis' words in his *Testament*, we have been examining this passage in order to discern as accurately as possible the framework of the fraternal community after the papal approbation. Further evidence is provided by what immediately follows this passage, namely, the prohibition against seeking privileges of any kind from the pope or the Roman curia. Of the whole *Testament* this must have doubtless proved to be the least understandable for his contemporaries. Yet it is the one point that best fits, with absolute coherence, the logic of Francis' ideal of conversion. A society like that of the thirteenth century, that was regulated by a hierarchy, organically systematized and arranged, was a society of privileges. The complex of these privileges managed to subdivide the society into a play of reciprocal balances between weights and counterweights. In this context, the renunciation of privilege was intended to guarantee the continuity of the condition of outcast that we have seen several times to be Francis' primary need and characteristic choice. This is confirmed by some recent studies on the matter of poverty. Among other things, they have brought to light how medieval society tended to divide itself, with respect to privilege, into the *potentes* and the *pauperes*. The former were those who came under the protection and the defense of privileges; the latter, the *pauperes*, were those who, deprived of all support, would find themselves in a totally precarious situation. Francis wanted these as his brothers and wanted his entire community to stay at that level, since he wanted them to have as complete a parity as possible with the situation of the truly poor, of the true derelicts and outcasts. More and more the deep meaning

of Francis' choice, which we have referred to several times, becomes clearer—as if it still needed clarification. All its meaning in terms of renunciation is even more striking when we take into account and interpret the sense of this prohibition against privilege. One sees that the generic protection of the *libertas ecclesiae* remained, in effect, to the friars' advantage, the same as it does to any man of the Church. In the practical reality of communal life, this reduced itself to renunciation of jurisdiction on the part of lay authority, ceding the jurisdiction to ecclesiastical authority. Yet how could this be of use to Francis and his *fraternitas*? They had, after all, renounced all property, however small, and thus had nothing as a subject of conflicting claims.

On this point we perceive an essential difference between St. Dominic and St. Francis, partly because the two found themselves acting in profoundly divergent historical and social situations. Dominic had recourse to the papal authority continually for a wide variety of reasons, seeking privileges for each and every eventuality; this should not surprise us. Even though the founder of the preaching friars tended to put forth poverty as a characteristic of the order, he still realized that he was working for the most part in a very political area, namely, southern France. There the overlap and interlock of jurisdictions made it opportune, if not necessary, to have a complex of privileges from the highest, thus papal, authority, for the purpose of assuring their freedom of action without obstacles. They needed this freedom in order to carry out their missionary task. Nor could a certain diffidence, if not plain jealousy, on the part of the local clergy be disregarded. In many cases, the clergymen themselves were aware of their own feebleness in the face of heresy. Yet they watched with annoyance the interference of these preaching priests: men who were educated, decisive, ready to take on opponents and polemics wherever feasible, even after the crusade against the Albigenses. In a situation like this, privilege was indispensable. Nor was there any reason to renounce it since the purpose that

Dominic had fixed for his confreres was certainly not a change of social station, as it was for Francis. Rather, theirs was a progression, an improvement, a higher level within the priestly state. Normally, they were priests before they began their activity, especially against heresy. The proposed aim for the preaching friars was collaboration with the clergy, reinforcement of ecclesiastical structures, help in the work of drawing back the people to orthodox teaching through word and, to be sure, example. Yet this example was to be a holy priesthood: worthy, meritorious of respect in every way, yet remaining and presenting itself in every case as priesthood. The request for privileges, then, pertained to the logic of the order and fit in perfectly with the needs of the geographical area where they worked the most.

All that we have examined here with regard to the Order of Preachers helps us to understand better and more deeply what has already been stated about the Friars Minor. In the Italian cities, the rapport between the civil and ecclesiastical powers was in itself difficult, so much so that any papal privileges had to be granted case by case, even place by place, with meager possibility of practical implementation or of effective value. The preaching friars fully realized this in their work in Italy. Moreover, the bishops' often difficult situation made them in most cases extremely jealous of their prerogatives. The result was that papal privileges in the end made the friars' work in the cities more difficult rather than easier. Above all, however—allow us to repeat it—it would have changed the condition that Francis and his confreres had wanted to enter. To be sure, obedience and reverence had been promised by all, through their founder, to the pontiff. Perhaps a cardinal, none other than John of St. Paul, had committed himself in ways unknown to us to give counsel and aid, if there were need. Because of this, he is traditionally considered to be the first of the so-called "cardinal protectors." At any rate, during the years that Francis directed and, as a simple but very attentive friar, followed the life of the community, no privilege was

requested for any reason from the Roman curia. Let us point out as well that rarely had any directive been so unmistakably specific; no privilege could be requested for any reason, not even for the most serious and dramatic situations—not even to facilitate and enable their preaching nor even for their own physical safety could special consideration be asked for. This last point was intended to confirm that the brother (and the whole community) should be defenseless, with no protection, just like someone whom life and society have confined to a condition of marginality.

The reference in the *Testament* to the needs of preaching was not casual. As mentioned several times, Francis combined here the reminiscence of papal approval with the experience of his short but intense life. From Francis' exhortations and command, we can infer that they must have had trouble in their relations with pastors and bishops concerning even their most elementary exhortations to penance. In view of their purpose and need, they were to avoid the forms and characteristics of the clergy's typical preaching. This very move, however, served to increase rather than eliminate the difficulties.

Francis and his confreres never wanted to enter into competition with the clergy. Yet the simplicity of the words they addressed to the faithful—it was not long until they were crowds—reached their hearts and inspired feelings of sincere spiritual transformation, more or less deep or lasting, but unquestionably real. From this unpleasant encounter with the clergy, difficult relations often resulted. Yet the *Testament* insists: not even for the sake of speaking to the faithful, which was still a meritorious spiritual action, were they ever to ask for privileges. If they were not given permission to work in a particular place, they should then move elsewhere "to do penance with the blessing of God."

Unless we are wrong, we have here a close echo of the gospel passage in which Jesus explains to the apostles the forms of their mission. Francis had read this passage and wanted to repeat it to his brethren. If we look closely,

however, we will discern a single difference worth mentioning and will explain its rationale. The gospel says that if they are not received in one place, the apostles are to go away to somewhere else but also should "shake the dust from [their] feet." The passage from the *Testament* that we have quoted here does state that they should depart from wherever they are denied permission to work. Yet it makes no mention of any gesture of reproach toward anyone who had impeded their activities of preaching and penance. The apostles had to move among unbelievers and Jews not disposed to listening to them. The friars, however, were in Christian territory. There, as was first said in the *Testament* itself, priests exercised full right in their local areas, which was respected even for the least among them. After all, they had the power to consecrate the Body of the Lord. The brothers had taken their own place at the edges of society and wanted, indeed were obliged, to renounce every privilege. This condition imposed upon them an unconditional obedience even in the case—not stated explicitly, but implicitly—where the "brother" was a priest. His sharing in Francis' company had declassed him automatically and left him deprived by his voluntary choice, even of the inherent rights of his clerical status.

Earlier, we elaborated on Francis' choice in all its seriousness. One of its consequences was that to leave the world was not only a religious act, a choice of ecclesiastical condition, but also involved giving up every privilege, every advantage, every protection in order better to mingle with the much wider mass of unfortunate people, ranging from the needy and extending even to lepers. This was the social area chosen as the "operational zone" for Francis and his group. It began at Assisi and then, thanks to the papal approbation, extended to all of Italy and the West. The words of the *Testament* communicate to us, within the vast range of their implications, the purpose and intention of the *fraternitas* in its essentials, yet with unmistakable precision. We can see more deeply into this purpose and intention owing to our greatly

expanded knowledge of the thirteenth century. His words also show the relation that Francis established between a memory of the past and the reality of the present in a bond between two distinct moments in time. The most impressive aspect that requires our attention as historians is the firm, organic, and tenacious coherence that comes across in the *Testament*, and by which it establishes itself as the supporting structure of Francis' ideal. We look at this inner coherence much more than at this anecdote or that episode, perhaps edifying, beautiful, touching, but always external. We should realize that this continuity and coherence are not dependent upon any specific series of events.

The ideal that enlightened Francis, that drove him to his conversion, that sustained him throughout his entire life, is peculiar to those who have the singular characteristic of being, by their very nature, profoundly linked with their own time and, concurrently, supratemporal, bound as they are to the human social condition. Marginality may vary with time in its components and characteristics, yet simply as marginality, it is always present in society, of which it is an irremovable part. On this account—in this study we will attempt to put it in the clearest light—Francis' conversion retains its power of being a permanent example, since it touches an aspect that is forever present and alive in the human condition. This is the source of his conversion's exceptional historical applicability; it is valid for its era and valid for all the following centuries. It has a power of adaptation that is the most convincing proof of its permanent sign-value, both in and outside Christianity.

The papal approbation of 1210, then, left Francis faced with specific problems. We have seen how he handled them; we have also seen how he recalled them, out of nostalgia and awareness of their irreversibility, at the end of his life. Another real problem faced him immediately: the choice of a place less inconvenient than Rivo Torto yet that would offer a minimum of permanence while still embodying the poverty to which they were committed.

We are rather well informed about these events by those who speak of themselves as having been with St. Francis and as having been present to aid him up to his death. In giving us rich detail about the intentions that he cherished for the place dearest to him, St. Mary of the Angels or, as it is better known, the Portiuncula, the account describes the difficulties he had in obtaining it. Before going into the account's details, however, it will help to point out the misunderstanding that could arise from an apparent divergence in chronology. It can be easily resolved—seemingly—only by considering that two different series of events are joined, after some lapse of time, which in actuality belonged to different sets of circumstances. In a passage from the *Legenda Perugina*, Francis' companions say that, in order to organize his brethren better, he brought them in the end to the Portiuncula, as if it were the first time that they had heard him speak of those things. The *Legend of the Three Companions*, however, and Thomas of Celano, speak of the Portiuncula right after the journey to Rome and the visit with the pope, in connection with Rivo Torto. Now, if we review all the factual elements at our disposal with proper attention, we will see that the Portiuncula was indeed inhabited by the first friars but without having the little church granted to them; their abode was a small cabin, no longer existent after it was razed to allow construction of the magnificent basilica of St. Mary of the Angels. There was, then, prior to their search for a somewhat more stable abode, a period of staying at the Portiuncula. It was merely a provisional stay; from a formal and juridical standpoint, it was even illegal. Judging from the story from the *socii* of his final years, Francis turned first of all to the bishop with the aim of getting him to concede them a small church, where the friars would be in a position to recite the office together, and where they could erect next to the church "a house made of mud and branches" as their refuge. They could not stay where they were—at Rivo Torto, as far as we know—because of the lack of space, but a greater reason was that, unlike earlier at San

Damiano, there was no church nearby. The bishop, however, responded that he did not have any place that would meet their needs, and thus he could not help them. This may have been because he really did not have anything available; it may also have been because he looked upon the incipient success of the movement with some reservation, even though at first he had favored it, at least as long as it seemed to be limited to being a purely local phenomenon. They received the same answer from the canons of St. Rufinus. At this point, St. Mary of the Angels looked ever better to the friars. Francis paid a visit to the abbot of St. Benedict on Mount Subasio, which was then rather wealthy (it was destroyed at the end of the fourteenth century). He told the abbot about all his troubles, without concealing the refusals by the bishop and by the canons.

The abbot seemed favorably inclined to their request. Following normal practice, he convened a chapter of his monks and, after hearing their counsel, ceded to the friars the church of St. Mary of the Portiuncula. It was "the poorest that they had," according to the *socii*, and they insist further, "Indeed, it was the poorest in the territory of Assisi." It corresponded fully, then, to Francis' desires as well as the needs of the group of friars that surrounded him. They had indeed grown but were still relatively limited in numbers. There was still another reason that helped explain Francis' request: although it still attracted the faithful and inspired much devotion, the church was nevertheless nearly in ruins. It thus offered an opportunity for restoration, which Francis had systematized to perfection at San Damiano.

Along with the consistency displayed in his preference for a ruined church, Francis also showed a shrewdness and experience in dealing with the monks that permits us to discern the former businessman. Now, however, all his cleverness was channeled to the defense of poverty and of his new situation as a person on the margin of society. The abbot of Mount Subasio had ceded St. Mary of the Angels without requiring any payment or rent. This

could have meant that they would be property owners, if only by dint of the thirty-year prescription. This in turn would have created problems as to their rigorous respect for the condition of the poor, "which was the solid rock" upon which Francis wanted to establish his community. Therefore, it was agreed with the abbot that the friars would bring them a basket of fish each year as an acknowledgement of the permanent ownership of the property on the monks' part. In his turn, the abbot would give them a gift of a vase full of oil.

In this way the community acquired its home. As long as he remained alive, it was the saint's favorite residence. Upon his death, it was destined to be the example and model for all the other houses of the friars, as the original community expanded into an authentic religious order. The period spent at the Portiuncula, after the cramped quarters at Rivo Torto, must have been a happy one for the little community, partly because of the ideal setting of the place. In one of his wills, Francis felt the need to evoke their way of life by a realistic presentation of the free, serene, and joyful existence they had experienced there. He did so with a deeply impressive sense of tenderness and lament. Again, as we have noted several times in regard to the major *Testament*, he brought out the bond between the evocation of the past and the reality of the present. "This is the way our elder brethren lived. Since the place was holy, they maintained its holiness by continual prayer day and night and by continual silence. If by chance, they spoke after the time set for silence, they did so with the greatest devotion and respect. They would talk about matters pertaining to the praise of God and to the salvation of souls. If it happened, which it rarely did, that someone started to talk with useless or idle words, he would be immediately corrected by someone else. They would eat meat, which they would earn by the work of their hands, but only after much fasting and many vigils, remaining cold and poorly dressed. In order not to be idle, they would often go out and help poor peasants in their fields; the peasants, in turn, would often give

them bread for the love of God."

The Portiuncula, then—remembered with affectionate nostalgia—allowed for the form of life that Francis had proposed as a model for himself and his brethren. The condition they had chosen, while it maintained all the rigor of eremitical life ranging from solitude to silence and continual prayer, also permitted them to take part in the lives of others and to engage in the living and practical good example of hard work. In this way the life of Francis and his followers found an orderly and stable rhythm that lasted quite a while. One observer of this life, deeply impressed by what he saw, was the French prelate Jacques de Vitry who serves as corroboration for everything said so far about the life of the early community of Friars Minor.

The search for a new center, as well as the increased number of brethren that necessitated the search, show us without doubt that a change of opinion about Francis had emerged and was progressively spreading among his fellow citizens. At least one of the sources, the *Legend of the Three Companions*, with roots in Assisi itself, makes this clear for us. Instead of the old insults, the mud and stones, the more or less cruel pranks, there had developed not only tolerance but even respect. We cannot measure how much influence the news about Francis' meeting with the pope, and the pontiff's approval of his plan of life, exercised over this change of attitude on the part of his fellow citizens. Nor can we be sure how strong was the support given by Bishop Guido.

It is certain, at any rate, that the new community had consolidated its existence at the Portiuncula. There it had found its path, it had begun its work of exhortation—a more realistic word here than "preaching"—to penance, to returning to Christ, to recognizing his redemptive work through the cross and all that he endured in suffering, humiliation, and death. Of all of them, Francis was still the first. He was tireless, loving, brotherly, happy at having recovered his interior peace. Outwardly he expressed his peace in song, in joy, and in full openness to all, especially the unhappy.

Against this new and diverse background, still another victory of Francis has to be situated: the conversion of Clare and the institution of the poor ladies of San Damiano.

VI

Francis and Clare: "Fratres et Sorores Minores"

1 "Ioculator Domini"

The success that seemed to smile upon the activities of Francis and his community, especially after their move to the Portiuncula, had particular repercussions in some of their own attitudes. These have to be examined with appropriate clarifications lest they give the impression of unresolvable contradiction, if not incoherence, in their behavior.

As it is, we have already pointed out several times Francis' need for recollection, silence, and ascetic rigor. His practice of these qualities was enough to rival the strictest of hermits. In addition, he wanted the Portiuncula to remain very strict in its form of life. At the same time, however, a whole series of no less valid facts speak of Francis' singular desire to arouse curiosity about himself, to provoke curiosity about himself, to provoke something of that sense of polemic, of ironic disdain, of mockery, that had characterized the early stages of his conversion and practice of penance. The need now is to put these disparate facts into some pattern, especially a spiritual one. The most significant ones involve Francis himself.

While still a youth, he was already dissatisfied but still involved with his friends and the light-hearted youth bands carousing through the city streets. In their midst,

he was once asked if he was thinking about a wife. His reply was that he would take the most beautiful woman in the world for his wife. We see in this banter—and that is all we see it as, not laden with the symbolism used by his biographers—a joking response to a teasing question. At the same time, we have to see in it a "courtly" vision of life. This vision did not necessarily have to dissipate, or be suppressed by the simple fact of his desire to change his social station by choosing the lot of outcasts. It was only a matter of implanting whatever was salvageable of that world into his new condition of life.

It is clear, then, that Francis wanted to draw attention to himself by keeping and adapting some forms of courtly behavior, even though he had to abandon it as an overall life-style. Yet he wanted to live the life of an outcast along with his courtliness. He found it at the midpoint between courtly lords and the common folk in *ioculatores*, jugglers, or more precisely, clowns. In this regard, it is a shame that this aspect of Francis' personality and of his circle of followers eluded a scholar of the caliber and insight of Michail Bachtin. It could have perhaps helped us better understand all his historical impact and influence.

It should be immediately pointed out that *ioculatores* are not to be confused with troubadours—or, to express it in Francis' favorite language, *trouvères*—since the latter were regarded as a valuable element of courtly society, while the former were the amusement, the object of mockery, scorn, and derision. At times they could react with ready sarcasm, striking back with the same force and more with which they themselves had been wounded. Within *fama publica*, their condition was definitely marginal. Even those among them who became rich and influential—and there were some who gained fortune from some lord or court—remained on the margin of society in general, if not of court society. In the terms employed by Francis, the work of an *ioculator* was not a *laboritium* that qualified *ad honestatem*, i.e., for the decorum that he wanted to accompany and characterize their penitential life.

Once again his creative imagination, still fresh and agile, found a psychologically and spiritually brilliant solution: they would be not *ioculatores*, but rather *ioculatores Domini*, the Lord's jesters. In this way they would be able to affirm with great clarity their specific kind of marginality, as it existed at least for some time in the face of the nascent "clericalization" of their movement. At the same time they could overcome and overturn the *inhonestas* implicit in the craft of *ioculator*. In this manner, the condition chosen by Francis and his companions was preserved: poor, derelict, humiliated marginality. Along with this, he retained the possibility—an important psychological aspect—of striking the popular fantasy and imagination, which could never be seized and entertained by mere words. Francis grasped this principle which nowadays is an elementary facet of mass psychology. He succeeded in appreciating its value with skill and with a sense of how the public would react. His feel for this was exceptional in terms of its success and effect on all levels.

An *ioculator*, simply by being what he was, attracted crowds whether in Assisi or in any other city. Yet, once the crowd had gathered, the *ioculator Domini* knew how to begin his task. We should not forget that Francis, like his companions, had converted as an adult. He thus had mature experience of public gatherings and of their moods, which in turn could be harsh, fickle, and passionate. It is in his capacity to pick up the feelings and the lines of force in a great number of listeners that we ought to grasp the importance of the bond between an *ioculator Domini* and a preacher of penance. Indeed, to repeat ourselves, this bond is a sign of the inspiration and the grandeur not only of Francis but also of his companions. The preacher always had to be ready, as Francis himself had warned, for every humiliation and suffering. The preacher was to know in advance how to react in but one way: with total resignation, with boundless patience, so as to seize in his weakness his greatest point of strength.

From games to penance: this is the arc over which Francis' labors extended, reaching at last a synthesis. He

was fully aware of this, if we can believe another testimony that apparently belongs to the same period. In this passage he uses an unmistakable Italianism deliberately in order to use the precise term, even at the expense of his Latin vocabulary. He, Francis, was destined to be *novissimus pazzus in hoc mundo*, the most singular madman that there was in the world. This is a definite category of outcast: madmen, indeed, were on the margin in the fullest way possible. They also had a direct bond with *ioculatores*, tending to take on the external appearance of crazy people. This revealed the connection between folly and buffoonery, understood as total liberation from the bonds and limitations of common logic but still capable of containing deep, painful, and decisive truths. In this madness lay the specific setting and intense validity of the penance that Francis wanted to preach. Perhaps the memory of the "folly of the cross" of St. Paul was at the root of his desire to display himself as a madman. It is the folly that saves.

In this dimension, which we have seen as being stretched between fantasy and reality, we find—and we are still within the period immediately following the pontifical approval yet prior to his visit in the Holy Land—a psychological dimension of Francis. As far as can be judged, it is personal for him and, in some respects, brilliant. It caused him to present himself, as an illustrious person, in a way that was both self-teasing and serious. He thus created a strident counterpoint to his condition as an outcast, which was obvious if only from the clothes he wore.

In an early and well-known episode, he proclaimed himself as "the herald of the great King" to highwaymen who had assaulted him for the purpose of robbery. He was felled by severe blows and thrown into the snow. He rejoiced in this, keeping in mind the sufferings of Christ, but also affirming himself and his mission against all danger and maltreatment. Still more significant, important, and lasting was his solemn and public declaration that he was the knight of Lady Poverty. We have to interject

a necessary critical caution here. We should not read the passages provided by the sources—not many, to be honest—in the light of the extraordinary little work known as the *Commercium beati Francisci cum domina Paupertate.* This account is set on the framework of a chivalrous romance wherein Francis is cast as the knight in search of Poverty, his lady. It is a text that, without doubt, has had the merit of helping us understand the sense and the importance of the saint's feeling. However, it has also added a greater weight and relevance than poverty actually had in Francis' mind.

At an earlier point we spoke of the education that Francis acquired. We also spoke of his knowledge of French which, as it often turned out, was more than practical, since he could sing in French, (although it is not certain that he composed French songs). In this context we can point out that the "courtliness" of the young merchant and then of the penitent did not come directly from the Provençal world, but had come to him indirectly through the French cultural experience. Now, there was an essential difference between these two worlds (the French and the Provençal) as regards their ways of carrying out devotion to a lady. In Provence one "courted" by exalting the lady, showing for her and her honor openness and generosity in conduct and spending, venerating her in every way. The style of "courting" was different in France, as seen in many romances. There the knight would render her honor above all else by taking risks and undertaking adventures for her, showing courage in overcoming challenges, decisiveness in reaching the chosen goal, devotion in dedicating to the lady herself everything he had done for her.

It seems to us, then, that presenting himself as the "knight of Lady Poverty" was for Francis one of the forms, dear to him because of his knowledge of the French world, of *ioculatio.* This was his personal expression of being the *ioculator Domini.* It was, to be sure, enlarged upon by the *Sacrum commercium,* an account that nevertheless remained sketchy. A moment of play thus was

brought to light and its deeper meaning was pointed out.

In this way, a penetrating intuition by Johan Huizinga takes on even more weight and worth. In his work *Homo Ludens,* he did not overlook the value, as play (in the Germanic sense of *Spiel* or the Latin sense of *lusus*), of this moment in the life and action of Francis of Assisi. In the light of everything we have examined up to this point, the great Dutch historian's insight is deepened in the sense that the "play" touched upon not only chivalrous sentiment but also the whole manner of Francis' presenting himself to the crowds as an *ioculator Domini,* the most effective manner of attracting, gathering, and convincing assembled people as individuals and as a group. An interesting convergence of circumstances developed. The pontiff had placed a limitation on the content of the preaching of Francis, of his companions, and of the community that was taking shape around them. The limitation proved to be favorable to the technique of presentation used by the *ioculatores Domini.* A clerical-style sermon, classical and traditional, should have taken place in church, with the tone, form, and techniques that were commonly in use. In contrast, the penitential exhortation—the only form permitted to Francis and his companions—ended up finding its natural place in the streets and squares of Assisi and then of other cities. The surroundings were thus human, real, concrete, and above all comfortable for the listeners. At any time, the *ioculatores Domini,* if conditions were favorable, could get up in the middle of a crowd, introduce themselves, and begin to speak about their theme and thoughts. The knight of Lady Poverty could recount his adventures, could talk of his love with the warmth, fervor, and emotions with which he had felt consolations or power. In civil conflicts or quarrels, he could touch the most delicate sensibilities of those present in order to incline them toward penance and direct them to a more Christian life.

Established at the Portiuncula, their life was serene and joyful, yet conducted in silence, ascetic rigor, and prayer. They were still connected with Assisi, where many

inhabitants continued to regard them, although quietly, with the same scorn and disdain. Others, however, now the majority, felt more and more intensely the charm of the merchant who had voluntarily taken up with derelicts in order to be like them. He had come to bring them brotherly consolation, but above all to elevate their material misery, so often joined to spiritual misery. He would point out to them the example of Christ, burdened with hardships that reached their peak in the supreme sacrifice on the cross.

Every day the friars went into the city and functioned there on two levels. The first level was that of the work in which they took an apparently active part, whether in the fields or elsewhere. In all probability, they engaged in manual trades, judging from a passage in the *Testament*, wherein Francis ordains that the friars who know no trade should learn one. The other level, of which we have just spoken, was that of being the *ioculatores Domini*. This work of restoring churches drew to an end as they finished bringing the Portiuncula out of ruins into fitness for occupancy. Restoring churches was inevitably leading them out beyond the city limits and drawing them away from the town's residents, among whom they wanted to live and function. By working at Assisi, they could, as "the Lord's jesters," do good for souls and call them to repentance. To this end they provided the example of their own personal renunciation, of the voluntary abandonment of their condition by birth.

The results made it easy to say that they were successful. However, to avoid all triumphalism and to measure the effective price they paid in suffering, humiliation, and renunciation, it is necessary to remember the long years, day after day, in which Francis and his followers, under harshly expressed alienation and reproach on the part of their loved ones, lived out their new condition with all its burdensome difficulty. As far as the exquisite sensibility of Francis' mind is concerned, we cannot know but can only imagine and try to relive the pain that rejection by his father must have cost him. Just as painful must have been the rejection, unspoken but no less real, on the part of his mother and his other loved ones. The sources do not conceal the reluctance he felt over begging for alms, nor his repugnance of eating the scraps that were mixed in his bowl. What mattered to him was that they had been offered him by the kindness of those who extended charity to him and who did not slam their doors in his face. The sources also do not conceal the insults or the scorn coming from those who earlier, perhaps with envy, had considered him as the king of the young revelers.

Many are the anecdotes about Francis, some perhaps true, most of them certainly faithful to his character as well as picturesque. Yet, on the historical level, it is more important to consider the daily affirmations he made within a world that, at least initially, was deeply hostile. It is equally important to think of the little conquests and progresses that he achieved over a period of years, if we are to grasp Francis' authentic grandeur. This was displayed by his succeeding at a time and by a deed in which he had seemed certain to fail completely. He was comforted in his striving, which exceeded human limits, by his sense of the mission he was to carry out through Christ and in Christ. We have earlier examined his youthful ambitions and dreams of glory and fame. While he changed their content, Francis maintained them with his usual tenacity and force of mind. He simply came to realize that the power of money does not free man, that armed violence does not break chains, that the pursuit of a thousand ambitions does not give one peace. It was revealed to him that the greatest joy lay in human existence as a total reality. This joy was found neither in the lot of the rich, as Francis himself once was, nor in the lot of the powerful, which he might have become, but in the lot of the masses of derelicts and outcasts. Francis made the right choice, then, by the example and sacrifice of Christ. He wanted to share it by finding companions and devising ways to attract others, lowering himself to the level of a clown or of a mock knight.

Success had exacted a high price; but the freedom he

gained and the joy that issued from it, as from his own labor or from exhorting others to Christian life, gave him the best reward. Francis' singing, whether in Italian or French, was the outward display of his joy stemming from his victory over the world. It also sprang from the hope of how much still could and should be done, and from feeling ever closer to Christ, even within the weakness of human nature.

The truest measure of this success is found, however, in a new development. It is one that our accustomed sources scarcely allow us to learn about; yet it is of exceptional importance for an exact understanding of the goals that Francis had set. We are talking about the advent of the sisters, the presence of that female sharing that had great importance in the Franciscan movement. And yet, a series of external circumstances tends to present this aspect as secondary, as being much less than its true worth.

2 *The Women's Movements and Clare of Assisi*

One of the most characteristic aspects of the religious life of the eleventh and twelfth centuries was the active female presence. It was not limited to the privacy of homes but operated openly in public with great energy and vitality. In whatever movement one may consider, whether heretical or orthodox, women had an essential and meaningful role.

To limit ourselves to one example among many of interest, we can think of the episode involving Queen Constance of France, while she was taking part in the sessions of the Council of Orleans. During this council, canons from the school in that city appeared in heretics' robes. After they were condemned, the queen took her cane and gouged out the eye of the condemned canon who had served as her own confessor. This gives us some idea of a series of events that are even more impressive for the fact that the queen was only one—not *the* only one of the women on hand. The female participation appears even more lively and operative when we consider the obviously popular mass movements. This holds true

whether in the case of the itinerant preachers of the first half of the twelfth century in southern France or in the case of the two major heretical movements, the Waldensian and the Catharist.

The great mass phenomenon aroused by Robert d'Arbrissel in Normandy, in the complexity of its elements, had an influx of women large enough to provoke the sharp rebuke that we read in the letter addressed to him by Marbode of Rennes. This bishop minced no words in warning him of the possible consequences of the fact that his followers were both men and women. One line used in the letter was the traditional saying that it is difficult, if not impossible, for straw near fire not to burn. Nevertheless, the joint presence of men and women did not cease, despite Marbode's worry; it culminated in the foundation of the double monastery of Fonterrault.

It is also true that the itinerant preachers did not confine themselves to calling for conversion and penance. With regard to the feminine condition, they vigorously protested the social wound of prostitution. To judge from some signs, it must not have been a small matter of limited numbers. Bernard of Tiron and Vitale of Savigny worked with all the weight of their words, authority, and activity for the redemption of these women. They worked for their liberation from the isolation to which they had in fact been condemned, both on a juridical level and on a level of everyday life. The aim was to enable these women to return to the normality of being "honest" people. It is necessary, then, to avoid the error of holding that the words of these preachers did not arouse an intense and favorable echo among other women. Their action had exceptional effect and resonance everywhere.

One of these preachers, the monk Henry, zealously concerned himself for the redemption of lost women, before he himself lapsed into heresy. He attempted not only to give them appropriate garments, but also, instead of secluding them in a monastery, sought to find an arrangement for them by encouraging young men to marry them. Thus they could cut off every tie with

their sad and guilty past.

If women were important in the French movements, they were no less so in Germany, where their influence was heavy. One can think simply of the most illustrious women of those years. The great Hildegarde of Bingen was one of them; she was able to gain the respectful attention even of St. Bernard. Another was the visionary Elizabeth of Schönau. It is hard to appreciate sufficiently the influence that these two women wielded in the struggle against heresy as they sparked public opinion both among the laity and among the clergy. Suffice it to say that they succeeded in enlisting Egbert of Schönau, Elizabeth's brother, to write an effective and vigorous polemic against the heretics, read widely with great impact. He was aided by Gebenone of Eberbach, who wrote a work (still unpublished) that managed to halt the spread of Catharism in Germany. The Cathars there did not make the progress they had achieved in Italy or in southern France.

We cannot overlook at this point another aspect of women's presence in the religious sphere—the spirituality of princesses and of noblewomen in general. In southern France, while women in court were the object of poets' compliments, some of them felt the charm of a deeper spiritual life. For our purposes, it makes no difference whether they were orthodox or heretic. Beginning with Constance, queen of France, at the beginning of the eleventh century, there was a series of pious queens and ladies. We can mention Esclarmonde of Foix, the heretical noblewoman, along with many others from her region. No less impressive and remarkable was the group of holy queens and princesses ranging from Kunegunde, wife of Henry II of Germany, to the princesses of Hungary and Poland: the intensity of religious living was made manifest in these women.

In the sphere of orthodoxy, a degree of hesitancy toward a more active feminine involvement in the movements of that period stemmed from a persistent, sometimes insuperable, block in clerical minds toward women as still being the continuators of Eve, who had brought

sin into the world, despite the fact that Mary later became the mother of our redeemer. Thus, the impression is one of bottled-up energy that is fully revealed when it bursts out, as it did in the heretical movements, whether Waldensian or Catharist. For Waldo, the longing for poverty, the renunciation of personal goods, and the commitment to preaching could be denied to no one. Thus, they could not be refused even to women, who from the beginning of Waldensianism were considered to be on completely equal footing with men. The social factor had no less weight among women. We can see this in the account, from Waldensian sources no less, of an old woman who took the heresy as justification for avoiding the hard labor that was expected of her. This factor was also important among the Cathars, for whom no precise difference existed between men and women as far as the performance of charismatic functions. Even women were able to receive the rite, mentioned earlier, called *consolamentum*, just as they were able to assist at it. The only variant was that special arrangements were made to avoid any physical contact between a man and a woman. However, it is also evident beyond any doubt that women made up a large portion of those who put off the *consolamentum* until the time of death in order not to be subject to the harsh asceticism connected with the condition of the "perfect ones." This was in spite of the unarguable reality that women among the Cathars were in a position of substantial inferiority, as demonstrated by the fact that not one of them belonged to the Catharist hierarchy. Further proof is seen in the Catharist belief that a woman, Eve—parallel to the belief among Catholics—was to blame for yielding to Satan's temptation. Moreover, women's ability to conceive also made them able to receive a demon in their womb.

Specifically in Italy, the sharing of women in all the religious movements had always and everywhere been lively. The presence of women was particularly active and important among the *Umiliati*: they were there both as wives to their husbands and as "continent" women. It

seems certain that they bore with men the identical burden of long, hard work, with no economic profit except what was kept in common.

From another angle, the female pressure upon the clerical and monastic world for their greater involvement in ecclesiastical life was considerable in many ways. Evidence of this was the case of the Cistercians. The various abbots—including St. Bernard, who had become a monk along with thirty others from among his family and friends—sought to resist the women who wanted to become nuns following the Cistercian ways: after a while, the men had to give in. No less significant, however, is the fact that right at this time double monasteries flourished, with male and female sides, as at Fonterrault. All this establishes conclusively that, in every part of Europe, at all levels of society, the presence of women was intense and often decisive, whether in court poetry or in monasticism, whether they were queens or poor women.

At this point, having discussed everything above, it is appropriate to raise a striking point: over a period of several years—the biographers estimate that it was at least six years since his conversion—no woman appeared among the sympathizers or followers of Francis. The fact should be considered historically certain, since no source says anything to the contrary. Thomas of Celano, in speaking of the reconstruction of the church of St. Damian, mentions it as the place that served later as the residence for the *pauperes Dominae* [poor ladies], qualified especially as being *de Sancto Damiano* [of St. Damian]. Thomas further noted that their *ordo* had its origin, as mentioned earlier, *a conversione b. Francisci fere sex annorum spatio iam elapso* (n. 18) [some six years after Bl. Francis' conversion]. He then gives elegant praise to Clare: *Clara nomine, vita clarior, clarissima moribus* (Clare [bright] by name, brighter [more splendid] in life, most splendid in her conduct). He notes that her conversion occurred some time afterwards. Even more singular is the fact that Thomas, in his second *Vita*, does not mention Clare at all, even though he does make note of the *pauperes Dominae*. Is this proof

that he was intending to devote a separate *vita* to Clare, the one that has come down to us?

These testimonies, along with others such as that from the *Legend of the Three Companions*, all fail to confirm any female followers of Francis, although this was commonplace among other religious leaders before him. In tracing the possible reasons for this, some pertain to Francis himself, while others are connected with the circumstances in the city that surrounded his conversion. First of all, we must remember that his choice, his fundamental option was not that of becoming a cleric with a particular assignment of caring for souls, whether men or women. Rather, his choice was to be a layman searching for his own way in isolation as an individual. The itinerant preachers and Waldo himself were people who had their views clearly in mind; they went about promoting them through preaching to others, with or without the consent of local bishops and priests. Such preachers would launch an appeal that might or might not gain a response—normally it did—from the crowds, including the women on hand.

Another factor also prevailed. Francis grasped and achieved something with his conversion that right from the first moment was a decisive step: he passed from one state to another, from one condition that was juridically and socially clear and fixed, over to a condition of true marginalization, the lot of helpless lepers and paupers. How could such a condition be shared by any woman? How could she join not only poor and leprous women but also prostitutes and sorceresses, the more difficult and complex world of female outcasts? Francis could accept the idea of sharing his form of life with some male companions, after explaining clearly to them what they were running into and what condition they were accepting. Yet in no way could he accept women on the same basis. We noted earlier that the residents of Assisi were harsh in their hostility toward the young merchant become a penitent. They spared neither Francis nor his first companions from insults, offenses, taunts, and scorn. It takes little imagination to see that it was a practical impossibility

to receive any "sister" into the community and not expose her to the worst pranks and to the most insulting suspicions. At any rate we will never know if there were any women who were in sympathy from the start with the brilliant youth who humbled himself in a life of penance for the love of Christ.

The situation, even on this level, had to change after the papal approbation. This was without doubt a solemn confirmation, within the legal limits set for it, that Francis' plan was by all means officially accepted by the Church, even though it seemed to have some disconcerting or surprising elements when viewed by an outsider. The approval immediately cleared away, at least on a formal level, anything that had seemed shocking or ridiculous in the young merchant's choice of life. Yet, for women, the chief obstacle continued to remain an essential problem: how to place themselves on the margin of society in the manner of the young, small community of the Portiuncula.

The difficulty cropped up abruptly and clearly when Friar Rufino, who had joined Francis in 1210, approached him. He explained that a young cousin of his, a noble like himself, known as Clare, daughter of Favarone di Offreduccio, wanted to enter their group and follow their way of life. Given Francis' zeal for souls, the question was becoming urgent.

Who was this young woman? What do we know about her? Fortunately, she lived a rather long time and was younger than Francis. A biography of her is attributed to Thomas of Celano, yet his authorship is no more than probable, owing to some passages of doubtful authenticity. However, we also possess the Italian translation of the process of her canonization. In her case it was decided to uphold the official practice of a process, unlike the rapid canonization that occurred in 1228 for Francis and three years later for Anthony of Padua. This proved to be a tremendous help for historians. The process documents contain the answers given by people who had lived with Clare even before she entered religious life. These

testimonies permit us to learn of specific details and happenings, some of which are of extreme interest for the study of Clare's biography, and by extension, of Francis' life as well. For our purposes we will use only those elements that will help us reconstruct the historical reality of Francis' personality and of the institutions that he conceived and established.

The arrival of Clare, with the problems that it raised and the decisions that it imposed, signaled a decisive turn in Francis' psychology and intentions. His choice, as we noted earlier, had been a personal manifestation of his own existential unrest. He later clarified and defined his own path in the gospel and in the *sequela Christi*. He gradually set forth his objectives as other brethren proceeded to join him.

From the sources at our disposal, we find the uniform assertion that, owing to the nature of his choice, Francis did not foresee any possibility of associating a group of women with his group of men. Not even the most embroidered and imaginative testimonies that recount the confidential discussions between Innocent III and the saint make the least mention of the possibility of a women's group or branch. The news about a young woman who wished to join them and share in the *fraternitas* had to come as a great surprise and not just because of the problems it caused. Indeed, Clare's request demonstrated that Francis' way could be attractive to women as well, if at least one wanted to pursue it. It was necessary, however, to see if it were a matter of more than just one. This development did not completely displace Francis' choice and ideal, but it clearly changed his center of gravity. Without renouncing their permanence in a marginal state on the social level, the brothers were gradually being oriented in the direction of a religious life that, given real-life necessity, had to resemble traditional models and forms. This was especially necessary to provide an arrangement for mostly younger women. Francis, then, had to make his plan of life not less rigorous and severe, but more adaptable to different concrete

circumstances of life, while still maintaining its character of penance and evangelism. This last element especially required firmness in setting exact limits.

We do not know how well Francis was acquainted with the religious movements of his time, particularly with the heresies. We do have some general knowledge of Waldensianism and Catharism in the region that at that time was known as the "Spoletan" valley, and that corresponded approximately to the triangle formed today by Perugia, Orvieto, and Spoleto. From the evidence, one can say that there was a Catharist diocese of some numerical importance. Toward the end of the thirteenth century, Ranieri Sacconi spoke of it as an autonomous church and gave some indications that help us establish its importance. Shortly before Francis converted, an episode occurred at Orvieto as part of the civil and religious conflicts. The *podestà* [Mayor] sent by Pope Innocent III, the Roman Peter Parenzo, was assassinated by "heretics"—at least, the blame was laid on them—probably the Cathars.

We know even less about the Waldensians, partly because they were skilled at concealing themselves and mixing well with the faithful. A clearer picture about them would help us to clarify the true situation within which the saint had to move, the space within which he could act, when Clare manifested her intention of affiliating with his community. Yet Francis must have known the heretics with greater exactitude than seems apparent.

For one thing, right up to the last admonitions in the *Testament*, he was forever declaring his warning concerning permission to preach: the friars were always to seek permission respectfully even from the priests in the most remote country churches. It was his prayer that whenever they were denied permission to preach, the friars go away in obedient submission, without protest or recriminations. Then there were the always friendly and respectful relations with the bishop. These are for us unquestionable signs of a prudence borne of a well-founded

fear that his own movement, precisely because of the originality and singularity of some of its features, might become confused with other movements. The fear of somehow coming to resemble the Waldensians must have led Francis to give up, if only partially, on a total evangelism, as far as women were concerned. He insisted that they remain closed behind the walls of a convent, and assigned them a form of life that was basically contemplative. Yet he associated them with the friars by obliging them to work and poverty, which he himself had chosen and proposed to his followers.

Francis must have arrived fairly soon at this traditional arrangement by progressively sorting out matters with Clare during several conversations. But who, then—we repeat our question—was this Clare?

Her family was not endowed with the title of count, although tradition attributed this to them by identifying them with the Scifi family. They were, however, certainly part of the city's ruling circle, and had been for some time. Her father, Favarone, had a great number of relatives, and this enabled him to act energetically in Assisi's affairs and to enjoy considerable prestige. Clare's elevated social position was matched by an economic situation that was no less prestigious. Her mother, Ortolana, also from a great family, had been able to make a pilgrimage to the Holy Land. She had also made several pilgrimages to Rome and to St. Michael on Mount Gargano, two typical places of pilgrimage for residents of central Italy. One may conclude that the family was a typical one of established nobility, although not of very high rank. They also seemed to practice their religion intensely, although, as will be seen later, not too intensely.

Chronological calculations concerning Clare's birth are debated, but they fall within a range of eight to twelve months. She was born either in 1193 or 1194 and was eleven years younger than Francis. She was already an adolescent when a major event occurred in the square of San Rufino in front of her home. It was the scene of Francis' formal and solemn renunciation of his father

before the bishop. It does not seem—at least the sources make no mention of it—that the girl was on hand, but certainly she heard the women of the house talking about it. We do not know exactly what comment she heard about it, but it must have made some sort of impression on her. At any rate, there were many people who had been close to her during her infancy and childhood who gave witness about her during the canonization process. They testified to her natural propensity for religious life and to her early display of exemplary piety. We are left wondering, however, about the intimate and deep roots that influenced her. Outwardly her life was that of a rich, noble maiden, similar to so many others of her condition and time. She was—and no doubts turn up here—elegant and gracious compared with girls of her age. The family, then, was hoping for a good marriage and had already, as is evident from the canonization documents, considered some young men who would have been able to offer economic and social status worthy of her. Clare firmly expressed her refusal, without indicating, however, her decision to dedicate herself to religious life, a decision that had ripened in silence. As in so many other cases both before and since, her father and mother were calmly waiting for the right moment or the right man who would succeed in winning her consent. If we were not afraid of forcing the sources to say more than they actually contain, we would say that it was not fair to think that Clare's parents, while counting on a good marriage, were anxious to have their daughter taken off their hands, even though she was already around eighteen, an advanced age for a thirteenth-century girl!

Beginning with her refusal of the first marital proposals, it is possible to discern a spiritual restlessness in Clare. It is unfortunate that we cannot determine to what extent she was stirred by the news concerning Francis that went on reaching her after 1209-1210. She could not have been unaware that, shortly after Francis' journey to Rome, one of her cousins, Rufino, had entered the group that had assembled around the merchant turned outcast and

penitent. Now it seems that Rufino had maintained a good rapport with his family; there is no evidence of a violent breakoff as in Francis' case. Thus Rufino must have told them about his life and that of their community. Clare must have confided her restlessness to him, which he, in turn, related to Francis. Each one desired to know the other, to meet and to converse. The biography, which condenses information from the canonization process, states, "When Clare heard the already familiar name of Francis, it was as that of a new man who was reviving with new virtue the way of perfection, forgotten by the world. She immediately desired to hear him and know him. Francis wanted no less to see her and speak with her, since the good fame of this lovable girl had come to his attention." He thus wanted to offer her to the Lord.

It was possible, probably with the help of Brother Rufino, for the two to meet in a setting that respected perfectly the mental dimensions of a city like Assisi in the thirteenth century. In the convergence of their desires to meet, not only Rufino had a role, but so did *fama publica,* that carried about any news of Francis and of Clare as well. However, *fama publica* was suspicious and, above all, gossipy. For her part, Clare—as became evident in the circumstances of her "conversion"—knew well that her parents might not have been anxious to see her wedding. However, she also knew they had no intention of dedicating her to God and thereby, among other things, of wasting their ambitious matrimonial schemes. This engendered the need for secrecy, which was buttressed by another factor: Clare knew well that she would have immediately been followed by other women of her household in her action—or, more accurately, her flight.

The encounter took place in the greatest secrecy, like those of two lovers. Clare would leave her house by stealth, bringing along a trusted woman, Bona di Guelfuccio. (How many times have we read in novels of clandestine encounters!) On his part, the saint would not come alone, but with a confrere from the Abruzzi, Filippo Longa, a native of Atri. It is unlikely that the exhortations

and spiritual discourses that the biography puts into Francis' mouth were the ones he really offered. There remains, nonetheless, the deep, intense, and unforgettable charm that he must have exercised over her. This is attested in a dream that has exceptional documentary value since it was recounted directly by Clare herself. Its worth demands that it be quoted here in its entirety:

"Lady Clare recounted that one time in a vision she saw herself carrying a jar of water to St. Francis with a towel to dry his hands. She went up a high staircase, but with the same ease as if she were on level ground. When she reached St. Francis, the saint drew from his bosom a breast and said to the virgin Clare, 'Come, take it and suck.' When she then sucked, the saint urged her to suck once again. What she drew out was so sweet and pleasing that she had no words to describe it. After she finished sucking, Blessed Clare still had between her lips the tip or mouth of the nipple, from where the milk flows. With her hands, she removed from her mouth the milk that remained there. To her it seemed to be gold so clear and bright that she could see her entire self as if in a mirror."

Another proof of this bond of deep trust and exquisite abandonment is the fact that Clare, during Francis' lifetime, promised obedience to him alone. She completely ignored any other hierarchy of any kind and had recourse to other authority only after 1226, the year in which her inspirer and master died. This is stated unmistakably in Clare's *Testament* in which, nearing her own death as had Francis, she reviewed the decisive stages of her life with terse simplicity in a few essential details. She stressed her relationship with her father and master, and pointed out that it was not merely verbal but also maintained through letters: ". . . he did not limit himself during his lifetime to encouraging us much by word and example of holy poverty. He also gave us various writings, in order that we would not distance ourselves from that poverty in any way after his death. For the Son of God, while he lived on earth, never chose to distance himself from this holy poverty."

These encounters, it should here be pointed out, were but the first of a series that lasted for the rest of Francis' life. To his zeal, Clare brought a response of total dedication. Regrettably, the letters that the two exchanged were lost; they would have been invaluable for revealing to us the most hidden turns of mind of two exceptional souls. They must have been not unlike the letters between Abelard and Heloise, or the no less interesting correspondence between Jordan of Saxony, minister general of the Order of Preachers immediately after St. Dominic, and Diane d'Andalò of Bologna. Their subtleties and hidden facets have escaped us forever. We see simply their bond of deep and total affection in its highest sublimation, lively and intense.

These secret encounters of necessity had to include more than talks of spiritual edification and holy purposes. They also had to touch upon practical questions toward enabling the new "sister" to follow their way of life, especially in view of the bitter necessity of her flight. It is difficult to say how or by whom she was prepared, or to what extent Francis himself was personally involved, even though the *Vita* of Clare describes the essential events with ornate but refined delicacy. The move took place on Palm Sunday, March 18, 1212. Clare went to church to take part in the day's solemn rites with the other women (the church must have been that of San Rufino, since the bishop was the celebrant there). In her festive apparel she was beautiful and elegant, as befitted a noble girl. She was as outwardly serene as she was inwardly troubled and absorbed by the grave decision she had to make, one that could no longer be put off. Thus, she did not notice the line that the women were forming to receive the palm from the bishop's hand. As a result, the bishop—had he been told anything beforehand?—came down from the altar, approached her, and gave her an olive branch.

That night she made her definitive decision, probably in some haste if not indeed abruptly, since her normal chaperone, Bona di Guelfuccio, was in Rome. In her place went her sister, Pacifica di Guelfuccio, according to the

canonization documents. In reality, there must have existed a small but genuine conspiracy among these women, perhaps a holy one, but one that was nonetheless concrete and effective. The witness for this was still another woman of Clare's household, Cristiana di Bernardo; and there is no reason to doubt her. There was no thought of leaving through the main door, perhaps either because it was watched or because the keys to it were inaccessible. It was necessary, then, to use one of the secondary doors that served as safety exits, always available in a large house. However, they were heavily barred, in this case with beams and blocks of stone. It was necessary to remove the barriers, and her biography indicates that amazing force had to be exerted to open the door.

Thus, Clare left her home, her city, and her family, and made haste for St. Mary of the Portiuncula, about two kilometers from San Rufino. One may infer as well a certain complicity on the parts of the guards at the closed city gates, even though the sources make no mention of it. After all, the church to which she was heading was outside the enclosure of the city walls. "At the Portiuncula"—that night it must have been crowded—"the brothers received her as they were holding a holy vigil at the Lord's altar with candles burning. She immediately cast off the filth of Babylon and addressed her farewell letter to the world." She then enacted a symbolic deed, decisive and painfully serious in those times: she shed her hair. Francis himself did the cutting, as is testified in the bull of canonization. Clare then rid herself of the fine garments and jewelry of a noble maiden in order to put on the rough habit that the friars wore.

The *Vita* of Clare does not fail to point out that the little church of the Madonna, which had been the point of gathering and setting forth for the friars, was now the place where the other order that grew out of Francis' inspiration had its beginnings. Mary, the Mother of God, was to be mother and protector of both orders. After having her hair shorn and having taken the habit before

the altar, under the eyes of the Virgin, Clare accepted the other external signs of penance such as the cord around her waist. She thus committed herself to be the humble servant of Christ.

Although much seemed to have gone well, there still remained two great difficulties that may have been foreseen but were certainly not simple to resolve: Clare's residence, if only a temporary one, and the reaction of her family. The first problem was eventually solved, but not without much prudent consideration, by sending her to stay with the Benedictine nuns of St. Paul at Bastia, about four kilometers from Assisi on the road to Perugia. Her relatives reached her there, reproached her for her action, and pleaded with her through flattery and threats to return home. Clare simply uncovered her shorn hair and displayed her symbolic deed clearly, in order to confirm the irrevocable firmness of her commitment. Her loved ones, although saddened and disappointed, nonetheless, had to adjust themselves to the reality and did not react with the harshness that Pietro Bernardone had shown toward Francis; none of the sources mentions any violence toward her. More serious was what befell the house of Favarone over a short period of time. One by one it lost a large part of its women.

Whether or not because of this family turmoil, Clare soon left the convent of St. Paul of Bastia in order to transfer to another, also Benedictine. It was San Angelo di Panso, about three kilometers from the city, near the present-day Hermitage of the Prisons. This convent was under the jurisdiction of the abbot of St. Peter at Subasio, the same abbot who, a few years earlier, had granted to Francis the little church of the Portiuncula with the small lodge attached to it. At San Angelo she was joined by her sister Agnes—the "conspiracy" was still in force—and the result this time was a furious reaction on the part of her relatives. If, as it seems, her father and mother stayed in the background, her uncle Monaldo did not succeed in containing his rage. As soon as he learned where the two sisters were staying, he burst upon them with twelve

soldiers in order to cart them back home. He found them, however, unyielding. Nor did they succeed in picking them up bodily—at least the *Vita*, the only source on this point, tells it this way—and when the uncle, foaming with rage, tried to strike Agnes, his hand was held back. Clare then intervened to plead with her relatives to halt the unjust violence and to entrust Agnes to her care. As the armed party returned to Assisi, Francis arrived to perform once again the symbolic rite of shearing the hair, of the investiture with the habit, and of the conferring of the cord as a sign of penitence.

Francis was led to make living arrangements for them promptly. The violence of the relatives was liable to recur every time the "conversion" of a lady would damage family ambitions. Also, it was necessary to provide the community's two new "sisters" with a stable residence of their own. They would soon be joined there by others, coming also from the house of Favarone. Francis settled them in at the church of San Damiano, that he himself had helped to restore with his own funds and labor in the first phase of his conversion, when the crucifix spoke to him. It was said that Francis, while he was restoring the church, declared in French that that place was destined to be the site of "a convent of ladies, by whose fame and life our heavenly father will be glorified." This incident, found in the *Legend of the Three Companions*, is confirmed by the bull of canonization as well. The fact, however, that Francis uttered the statement in French gives rise to the doubt that it could have been in jest or at least could have been imaginative hyperbole that was later transformed into prophecy in the minds of those who knew about subsequent events. There was another key factor that led, if not forced, Francis to make this decision: San Damiano, unlike the two monasteries, was under the jurisdiction of Guido, the bishop of Assisi, whom we have seen on more than one occasion. He was a man possessed of energy and prestige, determined above all to let no one disregard his authority. The *pauperes dominae de Sancto Damiano* [the poor ladies of San Damiano], as

they soon came to be called, could at last consider themselves to be safe. Now they could dedicate themselves to their life of penance, prayer, and work.

With these early difficulties overcome, there still remained the essential matter of the norm of life they were to follow. Whatever held true for the rule of Francis that had been presented to Innocent III, consisting mainly of gospel passages, could not necessarily be of use to Clare and her "sisters." They could not go out walking and mingling with the crowd in the city, even though the friars were doing so. Even less could they go around looking for work to earn their living. Moreover, they were totally prohibited from preaching, since this was strictly forbidden to women, even in the form of an exhortation to penance that the friars were allowed.

It was necessary, then, to devise a new form of life that would both be close to the gospel form and avoid in every way any obstacle raised by the canonical doctrine maintained very precisely by the Church. The solution emerged, after a few short months, with a new arrangement. Clare herself describes it clearly and adds the basic psychological premises into which Francis injected his fundamental point of view without descending to particulars. The few words that Clare wrote sometime afterward, as an introduction to the *forma vivendi*, the *Form of Life* that Francis had composed for his "sister" and for the others who joined her, are themselves quite significant: "The blessed Father observed that we did not fear any poverty, work, tribulation, debasement, or contempt by the world. Rather, we took them as great delights. Moved by piety, he composed a *Form of Life* for us in this manner: 'Because it was God who inspired you to become daughters and handmaids of the most high supreme King and Father of heaven and to espouse yourselves to the Holy Spirit by choosing to live according to the perfection of the holy gospel, I desire and promise you personally and in the name of my friars that I will always have the same loving care and special solicitude for you as for them.' "

It is difficult to overrate the importance of this text, since it is one of the very few, if not the only one, in which the two personalities appear together, shedding light on each other. The text also permits us to understand the various aspects that account for the permanence in Francis of certain constants, only part of which were shared by Clare.

There was much emotion, first of all, in the encounter of these two personalities. In their deep diversity each clarified the dimensions of the other, offering us a rare if not unique chance for our own introspection. There is the distinct impression here that Clare still clearly remembered a perplexity, a kind of intimate disquiet in Francis. He had not worried or feared for himself, yet he was cautious and even worried over whether delicate, fragile women would have the necessary resilience for his way of life. While still living in the world, he had no doubt noticed the daintiness, manners, and airs of female mentality. He had to prescribe for them a pattern of life, of which he fully realized the harshness and severity, even without considering the withdrawal from contact with people outside and its accompanying marginalization. He also foresaw the eventual possible grief which even the most austere mystics recognize as the aridity of the soul, the terrible aridity of one who feels abandoned. Clare discerned with penetrating intuition Francis' state of doubt. She saw the need to reassure him over herself as well as her companions: they had thought over thoroughly the step that they had taken and feared none of the renunciations involved in their abandonment of the world. The spiritual father's kindly but timorous anxiety was met by Clare's simple and serene firmness. This remembrance condenses events: it is not clear whether the *forma vivendi* originated in the same year as Clare's flight from her family or in the year following. Much occurred with the speed of lightning; yet, there had to be many discussions, hesitations, doubts, and secret uncertainties on the part of the young women of the house of Favarone, even before Clare took flight. One

perceives in these few words that her action was not the sudden impulse of a headstrong girl but rather the conclusion of an intense debate. The debate took place partly within herself, but was also explicitly discussed with her sisters and the other women—her mother seems to have been kept in the dark—with everything coming to a head with Clare's flight. The specific things that they did not fear were precisely those that had been observed and brought out in Francis and his friars. The women had asked themselves if they were capable of accepting those things, of sharing in a gradual process that impresses us as ascending from economic lack, poverty, and work, to the suffering that would ensue from their condition. They would be outcasts from the world, a fatal consequence of their new situation as penitents, objects of others' contempt and disdain. When Clare wrote this remembrance down, she was already a woman with a long period of religious life behind her. She was able to recall the matter tranquilly; her serene view stemmed from a balance she had achieved in part by carefully measuring her strengths beforehand.

Clare, then, had received a form of life from Francis, who had been led to do so by his deep kindness (I take this to be the meaning of the word *pietas*, as in the expression *pietate motus*). This form of life displays the profound wisdom of the converted merchant. At the same time, independent of the interaction with Clare, it is an explicit and precise confirmation of what he himself reiterated years later in the *Testament* concerning his abandonment of the world. Francis had considered, and still did consider, himself to be a knight of poverty or a *ioculator Domini* to attract the masses. For Clare and her companions, however, he expressed and underlined all the intensity and the supreme importance of the commitment they had undertaken. He made specific references to the unity and trinity of God with a specific relation—more intense spiritually than exact theologically—with each Person of the Trinity. The inspiration for their abandonment of the world had come from God. They had

thus become "daughters and handmaidens of the most high supreme King and Father of heaven." They had established a dual bond, one of which was a filial bond with the Father, no longer the filial bond of blood (for Clare, too, had renounced her earthly father in favor of her heavenly one) but with the common single Father of everyone. Yet they were also bound as servants of the King, the Creator of the Universe. At the same time they were spouses of the Holy Spirit, who is Love. This bond with each Person was possible because they had chosen to live according to the perfection of the gospel by following the example of Christ the God-Man. At this point, the distinction that we note between *"vivere secundum perfectionem sancti evangelii"* [live according to the perfection of the holy gospel], which we find here applied to Clare, and *"vivere secundum formam sancti evangelii"* [live according to the form of the holy gospel] might seem to be only a subtlety. The latter, although written down later than the former text, is nevertheless presented as a remembrance of an earlier time. The difference between the two phrases is not a casual one, since it serves to specify how the evangelical life, that both were to follow, was split into a bipolarity connected with the fact that the "brothers" of Francis were different from his "sisters." This was due to the distinct functions and realities that they were obliged to live and act out within the Church. Francis and his confreres had chosen the model of the gospel, namely, the life of Christ and the apostles: vagabond, uncertain, with no security for tomorrow, just like the Son of Man who had nowhere to lay his head. They had renounced every privilege, every possible safeguard, and were voluntary outcasts, ready for whatever sacrifice in following the example of Christ. To follow the *forma sancti evangelii,* the gospel model, was adaptation that could grow out of specific, real circumnot to serve them as an imitation and repetition of the life of Christ, but rather as an ideal of perfection that they were to hold before themselves always.

It might seem at this point that this is a return to the

usual formulation of the necessity to follow not only the precepts of Christ but also the evangelical counsels. Yet it seems to us that a new feature emerges here that in some ways was not foreseen, and perhaps was unforeseeable. The ideal of evangelical perfection is not determined here by a series of normative formulations, but is proposed as a plan of life that is concrete yet continually renewable. This perfection would spring from an ongoing bond of aid and affective concern between, on the one hand, Clare and her sisters, and on the other, Francis and his brothers. This was not to be a rigid, immobile perfection, but rather something that would contain in itself perennial power for change and renewal. This would serve their way of life as lived with all the flexibility and adaptation that could grow out of specific, real circumstances. They would have no plan of life that was absolutely predetermined with no room for adaptability.

In this way, evangelical perfection did not become for them an ideal goal attained through the formal fulfillment of this or that duty, in more or less definite priority. Instead, it was to be gained only by a process of interior progress and continual approach. Necessary for this was the presence of a touchstone, of a counselor who at the same time could be judge. This was the function that Francis personally assumed and which he thought could be continued by his brethren. It would be an exceptional task requiring not only capacity for discernment, balance in decision making, and deep insight into souls; it would also and especially require the gift of love, of sweeping tenderness, of fraternal concern that would be affected in a continuous exchange of requests and responses.

What has been said here is specifically confirmed by a fragment of a letter from Francis to Clare, the only survivor of the body of their correspondence. This little morsel only serves to make us lament the lost texts. The fragment deals with a specific point, namely, fasting, and has come down to us only because it is quoted by Clare. This must mean that she kept the letters carefully, since she was able to use an excerpt from them—the one

we are mentioning—in a letter that she wrote to Agnes of Prague in 1238, twelve years after the death of the saint. In its tone, in the instructions it provided, in the counsels it offered, in the wealth of human sensitivity and of fraternal love, there is revealed the flawless relationship between Clare and Francis. Francis states that it is necessary to distinguish, in regard to fasting, between sisters who are weak and ill and those who are healthy. The former are always exempt and are to be cared for with every attention, according to their need. The latter are obliged to the lenten fast, and to abstain from meat and animal fats every day except Thursday. They are to fast by eating only once a day, except on Sunday and on Christmas Day (Francis' devotion swings readily around to the day of Christ's birth!). This obligation of fasting also is to be lifted on Easter and on feasts of the Virgin Mother and of the holy apostles, unless they fall on Friday.

As we noted, the letter was quoted by Clare in its normative part. Yet the affectionate and loving presence of Francis is still there, seen in his desire to avoid excessive severity and harshness. A result was that Clare, later on in the "rule" which she prepared for her sisters, imposed on them all the fast with the lone exception of Christmas (it is in specific memory of Francis after so many years!). She entrusted eventual exceptions to the discretion of the superior.

Unfortunately, it is not possible for us to trace the bond of affection, of deeply shared counsels on spiritual life, that united Clare to Francis and vice versa; the sources are now missing. We should not forget, however, that where no mention is made, the bond nevertheless existed. It united two great souls, and it sustained and uplifted them during the difficult periods of their lives. That it was intense, deep, and unbroken is demonstrated by Clare's dream and by the fact that Francis wanted to see her again before he died. It is also demonstrated by the tears that his "sister" shed upon seeing him, the one who had changed her existence by directing her toward God, now destroyed by illness.

We are unable to say more, except that the conversion of Clare confirmed Francis in his major ideal and ambition. He wanted to create a new force for renewal within the Church that would turn to the immense majority of derelict and unhappy people. This would give new effect to the example of Christ, which outcast, unhappy, sick, and leprous people could finally see being practiced with their own eyes. The women who joined them were not a talkative, confused, flighty crowd, even in their search for evangelical perfection. They made it possible to hope that his ideal, even with adaptations and changes, could become a transforming force or, at least, a yeast able to stir the inert mass of tepid souls. It was these souls who held Christ as an object of veneration, of fear, and of other feelings; yet their hearts were not warmed, nor were they impelled toward a fertile religious life.

3 The Testimony of Jacques de Vitry

In the summer of 1216, on the seventeenth of July, an illustrious prelate arrived at Perugia after a long journey from faraway France. Jacques de Vitry had come to meet with the pope, Innocent III, by whom he had been named bishop of Acre in the Holy Land. He had traveled along the *via francigena* [the French road] and had passed through Milan. There he was struck by the number and variety of heretics. At the same time, he had admired the community of the *Umiliati* for their work, their religious zeal, and their determined opposition to heresy. He himself, after all, was the founder of a group of pious laywomen united in religious living. From Milan he had proceeded toward Perugia, where a grim surprise awaited him: the pontiff had died just the day before. It fell to de Vitry to be present for the bleak spectacle of the cadaver laid out nearly nude, deprived of its ornaments, in the first stages of putrefaction, on view in accordance with a sad custom of that age. The visitor did not have to wait long for his episcopal consecration, since the very next day—thus, July 18—the cardinal Cencio Savelli was

elected Pope and assumed the name Honorious III. De Vitry wrote that the new pope was a pious man who had given all his possessions to the poor. Consecrated himself on the following Sunday and fully possessing the papal dignity, Honorius III in turn consecrated Jacques a bishop. Since Jacques was now at the papal court, he was concerned to bring up questions relative to initiatives he had taken in France. Still, he realized from personal experience how much intrigue and politicking went on around the pope. Thus he had to stay on at Perugia and did business with the curia for a rather long time. The impression he got there unsettled him. He wrote to his friends in France, "I found many things that were contrary to my spirit. These people are so absorbed by secular and temporal affairs that involve kings and kingdoms, conflicts and court cases, that they hardly let anyone speak of matters of spiritual interest."

The French prelate's observations match the reality of those conditions perfectly. Shortly before, Innocent III had celebrated the Fourth Lateran Council, with all the grave problems that had a bearing on the governing of the Church's life, on the handling of heretics, and on other connected lesser problems. Furthermore, the question of the feudal submission of the king of England to the pope was ever current, since the king needed help in his opposition to the demands of the barons ever since the Magna Carta. In Germany, after the battle of Bouvines nearly two years beforehand, Frederick II was ever more the master of the situation, even though his rival, Otto IV, despite being beaten back, continued to resist. It was necessary, then, to establish clear negotiations and clearer conditions with Frederick, especially since sooner or later the question of the imperial coronation would be put on the table. The young emperor-elect had made splendid promises to Innocent, including going off on a crusade. All this was left vague, however, and still needed to take definitive shape in precise negotiations, around which Honorius could orient himself. His long experience with the curia had made him one of the most practical handlers

of the religious and political affairs of the Church, whether on the international scene or within Italy alone. Surely he discussed these problems with Jacques: some touched directly or indirectly upon France and the French sphere. One matter that particularly worried him was the delicate situation in the Holy Land. He could not forget that the fourth crusade had ended at Constantinople, and that successive attempts had turned out to be palliatives rather than decisive, or at least effective, solutions.

Jacques' dismay in the face of this tangled political web was tempered by one discovery: "I have, however, found one sole consolation here. Many people of both sexes, rich and worldly, have left everything for Christ, and have fled the world, calling themselves brothers minor and sisters minor. They are held in great reverence by the lord pope and the cardinals. They do not concern themselves at all with worldly goods; but day by day, with fervent passion and ardent zeal, they go about recovering souls that had gone to ruin in the vanity of the world, and then lead them into their way. By the grace of God, they have reaped much fruit and have won over many. It is enough for them to say, 'Come,' and one person will bring along another. They live after the model of the primitive Church, about which it is written, 'The whole body of believers was united in heart and soul.' [Acts 4:32] By day they go into the cities and villages to earn their living, with some of them pursuing their own activities. By night they return to their hermitage or to solitary places to give themselves over to contemplation. The women, however, live together in various residences as guests. They receive nothing that they do not earn by the work of their hands. Many of them are pained and troubled because they are honored by clergy and laity more than they would want. The men of this order, with much benefit, assemble once a year in a particular place to rejoice together and to nourish themselves in the Lord. With the counsel of experts, they make and promulgate their holy institutions, which are confirmed by the lord pope. Afterward, throughout the year they spread out through

Lombardy, Tuscany, Apulia, and Sicily. Brother Nicholas, a holy and pious man who was a countryman of the pope, had left the curia and had found a haven among the brothers; but, because the pope had great need of him, he recalled him."

This long, benevolent description of the fraternal community gathered around Francis is one of the most interesting that we have (scholars totally concur on this point) since it shows us the community at one of the crucial moments of its development. It had already overcome its first crisis, had affirmed itself, and was proceeding on its definitive leap forward, which would take it everywhere in Europe. Paradoxically, this testimony comes across as even more valid since, in contrast with other later notes by the same Jacques de Vitry, he does not speak here of Francis personally. Perhaps he had not yet met him, or perhaps he had not been impressed to the point where he would make mention of him in a letter. Even more paradoxically, Jacques de Vitry is important because he describes the phenomenon of the friars without yet having understood their fundamental inspiration. This is evident in the fact that, in his judgment, they follow the model of the early Church, underscoring above all the spirit of brotherly love that united them. Regarding their economic basis, he brings out, virtually in the same words that he had already used about the *Umiliati*, that they lived by the work of their hands. In reality, he does not succeed in grasping the deep difference between the two movements.

These very limits and misapprehensions are points that are basically external; and yet they confirm the objective, even visual, validity of his account. It provides a reference point and proof of rare precision and detail among the other Franciscan sources, which are thus provided with corroboration of exceptional importance. For his own personal reasons, mentioned above, Jacques de Vitry was a keen observer of these manifestations of communitarian and collective piety, and was vigilant in picking out their characteristic particulars. Some of these are

mentioned here in summary form with a critical approach intended to bring out their meaning without defining their limits.

We will not return to Jacques' hasty formula that presents the followers of Francis as living according to the model of the early Church. Hardly finishing with this generality, he goes on immediately to correct and specify it by citing, to avoid any mistake, the reference to the fraternal love that united the community of friars. At this point all the stories about Francis and his brethren recover their value. Even if the individual episodes of caring affection, taken one by one, could be debated or subjected to doubt, their very presentation in the biographical-hagiographical sources on the saint constitutes the proof of the image that the writers of his life had formed of his community. This image, approximate as it may be, is validated by the impression made on Jacques from what he had personally seen.

We ought to clarify the meaning of everything said here so far. Jacques had stated that "they receive nothing that they do not earn by the work of their hands." This explains on the one hand why he had not talked about a community of goods and of their use according to need. On the other hand, it constitutes the best proof of the Florentine episode about Bernard of Quintavalle and the charitable Guido, even though the story comes from a good source and is valid in itself. This clarifies for us, then, an essential point on the way of life of those who from this time onward could be called—and Jacques attests that the name was already in current use—Friars Minor. Their normal way of making their living was manual labor; for them it was an essential aspect of their way of life. Recourse to begging, even though mentioned by Francis, was not an ordinary occurrence. It was provided for but was to be used only in unavoidable need. In this connection, Jacques had brought out the fact that they received nothing or, in other words, did not accept donations from anybody (speaking, obviously, of that point in their historical development).

These specific data, well known and discussed, ought to be reflected upon and examined thoroughly. They serve to clarify not extrinsic details but rather essential aspects of this initial Franciscanism and the ideal that animated Francis from the very beginning. From the description that Jacques de Vitry gives us not of Francis but of his community, we draw proof once again that his conversion was not just a passage into beggary, but into the social condition of one living on the edges of society. One of this condition had to maintain himself with work that was not the sort of someone engaged in an ongoing activity, but of the type that had to be sought out day by day in order to live. One just might not find such work and could thus be forced to beg. His poverty, then, would become the consequence of his renouncement, not the motive. If the friars did not accept anything, it was because receiving something, as Francis had clearly said, obliged them to defend it. Defending property would cause them to depart from that state of social inferiority, of marginality, that was essential to the saint's plan.

Connected with this condition was the name given to the community. We find it explicitly attributed to them for the first time as "brothers and sisters *minor*." The testimony of Jacques is indisputable concerning a usage that seemed to be already current in 1216. However, one would like to know more about the origin and timing of this title of "Minor." Without entering into the still lively discussion of this matter, let it suffice to recall only the set of testimonies on the term's origin. One of them is this passage of Jacques de Vitry, which seems to be the first one in chronological order. Another is found in chapter six of the *Regula non bullata;* there, however, the term *minores* is not an official name, but carries a semantic value that is simply customary and adjectival. Finally, there is the witness given by Thomas of Celano, who—to speak frankly—is only trying to conceal his ignorance behind lovely phrases and biblical exaltations of Francis. He takes refuge in the end by invoking chapter six of the *Regula non bullata*. This leads us to draw a conclusion that

we consider certain: the "brothers" were given the title "Minor" by other people, and the friars themselves accepted it. In some way they themselves had suggested it by presenting themselves, as their father and founder wanted, as "*minores et subditi omnibus*," less than and subject to everyone else.

This seems confirmed by the fact that Jacques de Vitry, satisfied by the evidence that the name was in current use, did not concern himself with looking into the matter further, nor did he bother to learn just who was their founder. Moreover, this viewpoint seems to be reinforced by another fact, one that is not granted special importance: along with the *fratres minores*, the French prelate also mentions the *sorores minores*. This must have been the sisters' current name, rather than the official one of *pauperes dominae de Sancto Damiano*.

No less important is what Jacques de Vitry tells us about the dwellings and customs of Francis' followers. He divides them distinctly into two phases, by day and by night. Concerning the day, he says that the friars go into the cities and villages to win over souls. As a prelate well trained in canonical norms, he does not label as preaching the work of admonishment, counsel, and exhortation that they directed toward anyone living in the world. These works were carried out in order to bring people to a more Christian life in conformity with their obligations. However, he does state their effects: *magnum fructum fecerunt* [they brought forth great fruit] precisely by word and by their laboring activity as well. By night they gave themselves over to prayer and contemplation. The best sources, especially the *Legend of the Three Companions*, give us a series of particular proofs of what Jacques says here in terms that are general but not vague or commonplace.

Since Jacques was interested in women's religious life, he does not fail to present us the essential features of the "sisters minor." In order to distinguish them from the brothers, he states immediately that they live in diverse guest residences (*hospitia*). Since, as was said earlier, all of

them, men and women, live by the labor of their hands and refuse every donation, they make a fine impression and gain much respect, to the point that they are troubled by it. Far from the insults, mud, and rocks hurled at Francis, we are now at the point of his success. While he seemed to have realized the dreams and ambitions that attracted him as a young merchant, his success would actually become his secret torment more and more. It was progressively leading the "fraternity" little by little away from the marginality that he had spontaneously chosen.

Another fact related by Jacques de Vitry confirms that the brothers—we are told explicitly that they are involved and the sisters were excluded—were already in the practice of assembling each year to make decisions in common under the guidance of experts. They then submitted them to the pope for approval before propagating them as norms. Here we are looking at the great innovation that was made necessary for Francis and the Friars Minor to organize a religious life that would be as ordered and unified as possible. The innovation was the general chapter which, according to the *Legend of the Three Companions*, was born at Assisi.

In connection with these details, we believe that the *Legend of the Three Companions* is particularly important. Chapters fourteen, fifteen, and sixteen are singular since they serve the purpose of establishing the connection between the Assisian history of Francis from his youth up to the Portiuncula and the event of his death and sanctification.

Let us note right away that, without going into specific point-by-point demonstrations, the *Legend's* account suddenly leaves off the particular incidents to give way to extremely general information concentrated around three points. The first is the importance of the chapters that were held at the Portiuncula—still at Assisi, in terms of chronology and location. The second point was the death of the cardinal John of St. Paul, and his replacement by Ugolino of Ostia in his function as "father and protector" of the order. The third is the hierarchical arrangement of

the order, with the post of protector entrusted "officially" to the same Ugolino. There follow, as mentioned, the final chapters rich in detail as the earlier ones, and concerned with the life and civic reality of Assisi.

These three central chapters—to dwell on matters already known—appeared so deceptive to Paul Sabatier, that he was led to the noted thesis that there had been an arbitrary censoring of these chapters on the part of ecclesiastical authority. According to his thesis, the original chapters were removed because in some way they could have limited or impeded the hierarchy's control over the order (yet these chapters are then supposed to have been rediscovered in the *Speculum perfectionis*!). Upon closer examination, however, the chapters do not justify any sense of deception, if we observe that the Assisian writer here synthesized the echoes on the life of the order that reached him there in the city. It thus becomes natural for him to have assembled whatever he had managed to learn about some of the characteristic and meaningful facts, and to have left the rest aside. It is no less interesting that, in a synthesis that was neither foolish nor superficial, even though incomplete, the writer was able to insert some echoes of Francis' short works. He must have been familiar with them, e.g., with the *Admonitiones*, either by having read them little by little as they were being published, or because he was made aware of them afterward. This would explain as well the uncertainty of his chronology. It is as if he were recording information that had reached him haphazardly, without organic and systematic coordination.

Nonetheless, chapter fourteen, in dealing with the reunion (or chapter) of the friars twice a year at the Portiuncula, escapes at least in part the reproach of faulty chronology. It clearly relates that the custom of everybody's meeting twice a year, on Pentecost and on the feast of St. Michael, September 29, emerged from the desire to see and visit with each other. In these early years, those involved were still persons who had lived together and had experienced their "conversion" more or less in

the same period of time. Affective needs moved them more so than did any organizational requirements, however valid. It is not remarkable, however, that the *Legend* gives no account of the chapter held on St. Michael's day. It may have fallen into disuse after a period of a few years. Already in 1216, Jacques de Vitry speaks of only one meeting a year. Both sources, however, confirm the characteristic function of the chapter. It was to discuss together, in the format of an assembly, the problems that had developed during the course of the year. That Francis dominated them, at least as much as his energies would permit him, comes as no surprise for anyone who can accept the synthetic but effective portrait made of him in the *Legend of the Three Companions.*

Nonetheless, before speaking of Francis and his action in these chapters, it is necessary to try to investigate further the function that the chapters exercised in the community's life. It is also necessary to know what they meant to Francis, apart from the joy of everyone's meeting each other again. Here we want to bring out a personality trait of his that we mentioned earlier in speaking of Clare and of his rule; it is still helpful to examine it.

We said earlier of Clare that the *forma vivendi,* written for her by Francis, consisted of a few lines that set the course for seeking and achieving evangelical "perfection." It was mentioned in that section that the forms and modes of implementation would be suggested little by little as specific occurrences and eventualities presented themselves. This was true in the specific case of fasting. Now, attention is not always paid to the fact that the rule, presented rapidly and in few lines to Pope Innocent, was certainly more elaborate, but not by much, than the one written for Clare. We can see this if we agree with the generally accepted thought that it must have consisted of a series of gospel passages compiled in various ways into the form presented in the first chapter of the *Regula non bullata.* One understands, then, that in real-life situations these passages maintained their value and importance in a general framework, in the common background of the life

of Francis and his brethren. Without doubt, however, they must have constituted the platform and the point of departure for a whole series of developments. Some of these Francis carried out with personal commitment in what concerned him individually, but which were left to the others to establish as general norms. For example, the duty to do penance was, so to speak, present to all; yet the same was not true concerning the ways to carry it out. This applied as well to prayer, contemplative life, and work itself. Moreover, in setting eventual regulations, they could not avoid giving due attention to the traditional body of canon law of the Church, which was quite firm in making itself respected. Even more important were these general norms of life, since Francis repeatedly stated his insistence on obedience to the hierarchy, from the most obscure pastor up to the pope.

Other problems presented to these chapters included those regarding relations with the local ecclesiastical authorities, becoming ever more difficult as the friars expanded their field of action and began to work in areas progressively distant from Umbria. The Friars Minor—and on this point the testimony of Jacques de Vitry is fundamental—had already spread throughout the entire Italian peninsula, from Lombardy to Sicily. Even allowing for a certain degree of exaggeration by the French prelate, the fact remains, as confirmed by other sources, that their expansion had gone well beyond the original limits of their activity.

At this point, let us recall what Francis did after their first missionary effort, when the group was still very small. In order to evaluate what had been done as well as to establish the basis for whatever could realistically be accomplished in the future, Francis wanted everyone to report. In this first episode, as well as later on in the chapters recorded in the *Legend of the Three Companions,* the saint displayed an unsuspected talent for counseling to action, as well as inexhaustible energy. He applied these qualities also in dealing with churchmen and with lay nobles. They may have come by out of curiosity, but it

still behooved him to approach them to lead them into a life of penance and holiness. At the same time, he never failed to show deep affection for the poor and was always ready to serve them unconditionally.

In many ways, then, the papal approbation had allowed the little group to engage in effective work by freeing them from possible obstacles and difficulties. In contrast, the initiation of the chapter seems to signal, as a consequence of their move to the Portiuncula, the barely discernible passage—although no less important or relevant juridically—from being *fraternitas* to being *religio*, namely, to being a true religious order. This passage included all the consequences that derived from it, in particular the closer relations that they were developing with the Roman Church and the pope. The *fraternitas* continued being the brotherly group held together by a bond of affection and by the fact that they all had abandoned everything to declare their sonship toward the Father of all who is in heaven. The community was able to conduct itself along the fairly general lines approved by Innocent III. Their fewness in numbers allowed them a precise yet broad freedom of action without supervision. Their subsequent numerical increase confirmed the success of the example given by the little group of brethren and basically met with the wishes of Francis and his companions. However, it also set in motion a series of repercussions that should not be underestimated for their importance. First of all, it began to attract the attention of church authority, not only that of the bishop of Assisi, but also of the central authority in Rome. It seems that Guido never withdrew his consent or benevolent support from Francis. However, in Rome they were hearing in one way or another the echoes and voices of other bishops who had seen the "brothers" in action, and no one said that their reactions to them had to be always and totally favorable. Along with the attention grew a worry. The friars of the Order of Preachers did not stir up anxieties, since their status as priests and their cultural training, especially theological, placed them above all suspicion. The same, frankly, could

not be said of the Friars Minor. Many, be it recalled, were laymen, and could be feared to be open to some heretical insinuation. Certainly the founder himself, Francis, was not uneducated. His personal fervor and piety and his obedience toward the Church were beyond question, especially from the viewpoint of the popes, starting with Honorius III. Yet, surely Francis did not have the theological, doctrinal, and canonical preparation that was necessary to maintain control over a religious order, which is what was forming around him with overwhelming natural force. In some way this order was modifying and transforming what had been his plan of passage into the ranks of the outcasts, lepers, and miserable poor.

The chapter is discussed from two different points of view, by Jacques de Vitry and by the *Legend of the Three Companions*, both of which underscore its importance. In some of its features, the chapter also came to respond to the Church's concerns for proper form. From one angle Jacques, who without doubt was thinking of the chapters with which he was familiar in the monastic orders, put emphasis upon the normative and legislative aspect of the chapters themselves. The *Legend*, however, presents Francis to us as the soul of these assemblies, although committed to sorting out the emerging problems. Among these were: how better to observe the rule, how to interpret its meaning in its concrete aspects, where best to preach, and where to settle. He confirmed—and this point seems especially significant—the duty and pledge of respect for the Church and for the ecclesiastical sphere. He promoted the most respectful devotion to the sacrament of the Eucharist with an insistence that continued without interruption until the end of his life.

In the *Legend* there is one part that, while it seems to refer again and again to the admonitions Francis gave in the chapter, has a specific value and meaning that cannot be overlooked. Its usefulness lies in determining the proper and characteristic outlines of his social conduct: the attitude to assume in regard to people who *delicate vivunt*, i.e., who live in luxury and leisure. Since no one,

the saint cautioned, can arrogate to himself the right to judge others, in the same way there is no need to criticize one who loves luxury or vanities. In point of fact, we do not know what God can and wants to do with them. Here he seems to be recalling, with specific confidence and gratitude, his youth *in peccatis*, out of which the Lord had brought and rescued him by showing him the path of penance. He added that it was necessary to respect such people as brothers and masters, first of all, because they were all created by one Father and Creator. Furthermore, "they help good people to do penance by giving them the necessities of life." He also added the duty and obligation of giving good example, which seems to stem from some personal experience. In any place and with any person, the brethren were to conduct themselves in such a way as to lead all to exalt and give thanks for the goodness of God.

In the chapters as well, Francis underscored the power of example and inculcated it into his friars with an insistence that would turn out to be one of the most characteristic manifestations of his personality, especially in the last years of his life. It was then that because of the notoriety and fame he had gained he became worried that he had not lived up to the model of his choice, the first one he had made in his youth. He especially returned to speak of the peace that they were supposed to show as a sign to the world; as participants in his "fraternity," they were personally obliged to make this peace a concrete reality in their lives every day. No one should have been led by them into wrath or scandal. Rather, all others should be led to the love of peace, kindness, and concord by their meekness. Indeed, the brothers had made it their own choice to heal the wounded, to treat the injured, to call back the wayward. He added finally this essential and fundamental admonition: "Many who seem to be members of the Devil's following will someday be disciples of Christ."

In this way, Francis sought to insist on the spiritual function that the friars should have been able to exercise

in society. Yet the *Legend* also highlights another important and operative aspect of the balancing function that all the assembled expected the chapter to perform. As happens in every community, while he had to exhort them to fulfill their mission and give good example, he also found it necessary to take a stand against the excessive rigors of others. An instance of this was displayed earlier in the case of Clare and the fasting of the "poor ladies of San Damiano." He intervened, then, to moderate the severity of those confreres who were too austere toward themselves and were mortifying themselves excessively in vigils, fasts, or corporal penances. A sign of Francis' deep interior balance is the fact that he worked to restrain the ones who were so harsh in their asceticism as to appear to hate their own bodies. He did not normally go so far himself, even though the sources make mention of violent temptations, or that he reproached "Brother Ass" as he jokingly named his body. There is even a passage in his writings that warns that, in case of need, they must know how to hate themselves.

Above all, however, the action and presence of the saint at the general chapters had a function that was, in today's terms, charismatic in the highest and noblest meaning of the word. He showered encouragement on everyone and lavished his smile on them all. Anyone who had spiritual anxieties, anguish, or uneasiness could open his mind to him and confide in him, receiving words of comfort that would reassure him and restore his confidence. The *Legend of the Three Companions* asserts that Francis was not a judge, but a merciful father among his sons, a physician among his sick ones, even though when necessary he chose and knew how to be severe and how to resort to scolding.

These general chapters, besides deciding on norms of conduct and life that would be valid for all the brethren, and besides being a trusting encounter with their spiritual father and master, also served one final function. After all were blessed, the chapter would proceed to a kind of test for those who wanted to engage in preaching which,

as stated earlier, was to be limited to an exhortation to penance. The test in reality did not consist of an examination designed to measure their cultural training, but to determine above all whether they had the necessary spiritual qualities and eloquence.

This fact shows that the specific and limited type of preaching carried out by the Friars Minor required different qualities than did the actual preaching done by the priests. Francis never personally adopted their oratorical technique, which apparently he disregarded. He certainly bore no love for it, since he was hostile to any form of interpretation that ran the risk of falsifying, if not destroying, the literal sense of the tests, which, for him was the only true sense.

Around this time, shortly before or after Jacques de Vitry's observations, we find some information about Francis and his style of preaching. This comes to us from one of those—not very many—who personally heard Francis talk. He was the notable chronicler Thomas of Spalato, who tells us in his *Historia salonita* of the fervor with which the saint was received at Bologna. He gives us this valuable information: when speaking in public, Francis did not employ the *modus praedicandi*, i.e., the accustomed technique of priests, but rather the *modus concionandi*, the technique used to address civic assemblies. At this point it is helpful to make an observation. For the ecclesiastical authority, the most important element of preaching was its content. This imposed limits on those who were not priests, which included Francis. He did not register any annoyance or bother over these objective limits. Rather, he was concerned in particular not so much with what to say as with how to say it and to what purpose. Now, on the *modus concionandi* we have much instruction, valuable in many aspects, from a *magister dictandi*, a great teacher of rhetoric named Boncompagno [Goodfellow] of Signa. He was a contemporary of the saint and dedicated an entire book in his *Rethorica novissima* to the art of "*concionare*" [declamation, haranguing], thus helping us to understand the full meaning of the words of Thomas of Spalato.

This oratorical technique made use above all of means aimed at provoking the sensitivity and imagination of those present. For example, says Boncompagno, if someone wants to advocate a proposal of war, he should show up at an assembly wearing arms. He should then roll his eyes fiercely, speak with an excited voice, flail about, fling himself in desperation to the ground. The whole time he should be making a racket by rattling his armor and weapons. In this way the external devices impressed the listeners and drew them along—or else the speaker might put the demand to them directly—up to the point of gaining their consent for the proposed military action. At Bologna, Thomas informs us, the saint chose as the theme for his discourse, "Angels and Devils."

The words of the Dalmatian chronicler show us an even deeper meaning and value of the habit worn by Francis and his companions. Their rough, patched tunic, the cord at the waist were not only external symbols of their condition as penitents, but also moved those present as a visual invitation and stimulus. They would be driven in a spiritual direction, pointed out for them by the words that had exhorted them to penance.

To conclude this presentation of the testimony of Jacques de Vitry with all the implications connected with it, we can now fully realize how right he was in saying that the only comfort he had found in Perugia, after so long a stay in the curia, had been the presence of the Brothers and Sisters Minor. Despite having misunderstood some things and having only partially appreciated others, he realized, however inchoately, that they represented a substantially new force in the life of the Church. Perhaps the sharpest observation is the one that springs not from this or that part of his testimony, but from its organic entirety: new men, new foundation, ability to reach any social level and any human person. It is this possibility of finding diverse ways of penetrating people's hearts that impresses him the most. It is not without purpose that he relates the episode of the aide to Honorius III who became a friar only to be recalled to the pope's

side on grounds of being too valuable to let go. Nor was it an accident that, as the *Legend of the Three Companions* tells us, cardinals wanted to secure the assistance of friars and were not able to, at least in the early times.

This is the central fact of these years: the order was reaching a turning point in its life owing to a crisis of growth, yet also because of its newness in the Church along with a more intense and decisive missionary thrust. The friars realized that they would have to have a closer bond with the papacy in order to receive the more specific directives that Francis' commitment to obedience rendered inevitable. Under the circumstance, the need existed to institutionalize a reality that until this point had functioned in an informal way. For years a cardinal, namely, John of St. Paul, had followed the order's life attentively, although the sources make no mention of excessive or even notable interfering on his part. This cardinal was right for that time, partly because as bishop of Sabina he was an influential man in the curia. Now, however, the cardinal was dead. The problem then was to find a new person to serve as a channel, just like the cardinal who had gone before. This new person was Ugolino, bishop of Ostia. In contrast with his predecessor, he was a man more of action than of intense spirituality. He exercised notable influence upon the order, since he wanted to establish with Francis a rapport of closer friendship and of stronger confidence.

VII

Expansion of the Order through the Intervention of the Curia; Care of Souls

1 The Problem of Ugolino of Ostia

The activity and intervention of Ugolino of Ostia in the life of the Order of Friars Minor, his personal influence on Francis, the goals that he set for himself have been, from Sabatier onward, the object of so much discussion that several monographic studies have resulted therefrom. As in other cases, the discussion in this matter has polarized people either for or against the theory of Sabatier, with varying degrees of assent or dissent. Only recently has there been a return to the study of the sources, inquiring into them level by level. In the main, Sabatier, seeing in Francis the proponent of a freely enthusiastic piety rooted in the love of human beings and of nature, presents Ugolino of Ostia as the *longa manus* [long hand] of Honorius III. The two had worked together to transform the free "fraternity" of enthusiasts for Christ into a religious order that would respond to the needs of the curia and the papacy, and made into tools for authority's ends. In doing this, the free initiative and the joyous spirituality of Francis are said to have been coerced by every means into submission, thus overturning his original ideal and fertile spontaneity.

In favor of this theory of Sabatier and of those who followed him, certain uncertainties, distortions, and

reticent sections of the sources give him support. Thomas of Celano, writing in the first *Vita* of Francis around the time when Ugolino of Ostia had already become Pope Gregory IX, gives this pope great importance and space. In the second *Vita*, however, written in 1246—some years after the death of Gregory—his importance in the development of the order is downplayed. The result of most recent research on the role of Ugolino in the history of Franciscanism in its early years is very modest indeed.

Who was this cardinal, and what importance had he assumed in the curia? He was entrusted with an undoubtedly delicate task, even though it might seem today, at a distance of several centuries, less difficult. As a matter of fact, Ugolino of Ostia had been formed under Innocent III in an elite school of curial practice and international relations. The pope had put him to the test in the negotiations with the Germans, namely, Markwald of Anweiler and Dipold of Vohburg, who remained in Italy after the death of Henry VI. The pope continued to use Ugolino as his trusted traveling diplomat during the strife in Germany between Philip of Swabia and Otto of Brunswick. Having the same confidence in him as did his predecessor, Honorius III entrusted him with an even more important mission in 1217. This time the aim was to make peace among the cities of central and northern Italy by means of a proposal that set up a financial-military organization among the cities involved. Its goal was to collect funds for the crusader states, which were having serious difficulty supporting themselves in the Holy Land.

In that situation Ugolino carried out an active and intelligent diplomatic effort that, nonetheless, did not yield the desired results. During this period, he met Francis at Florence and began with him a relationship of mutual esteem that lasted until death. They were, however, two mature personalities seeing each other there for the first time. Ugolino, an expert diplomat, was endowed with a deeply religious spirit. Evidence of this is found in his earlier relations with the Cistercians and in particular with Rainer, his teacher, whom he helped and

protected. Until the meeting in Florence, however, he had not been interested in the Friars Minor or in Francis. On his part, Francis was now well aware of the seriousness of the situation in directing and guiding the movement he had founded and concerning which he had suffered so much. Its very success was only multiplying the difficulties.

In reality, the testimony of Jacques de Vitry showed Francis' movement while it was in a time of transition. It seems that this is confirmed by the *Legend of the Three Companions* when it speaks of that same period. From an institutional point of view, this was the phase in which the *religio*, already the Order of Friars Minor, took on a minimum structure. Francis was still its pivot and center, even though there was danger that it would all slip through his hands. Thus, he needed collaborators both around himself and on the periphery. Slowly and continuously, although we cannot reconstruct any exact chronological sequence, residences were being formed outside of Assisi. While the friars still maintained the requirements of external poverty and eschewed all right to property, they ended up having some sort of stability. The houses served as nuclei that did away with continual recourse to Assisi and became points of reference on the community's periphery. By now it was obvious that it was no longer possible for all the friars to be with Francis, a fact that was proven by the expedient of the general chapter. After all, they wanted to meet the demands of their vocation, which meant traveling around exhorting people in different places to penance.

This new structural arrangement entailed, of course, the establishment of local jurisdictions. These had to be set up by the general chapters in response to emerging situations as well as in conformity with an approximate but agreed-upon plan of expansion. It was necessary, then, to lay out a systematic distribution of territories. This was accomplished, but the sources give us to understand that it was more the fruit of enthusiastic improvisation than of a precise and conscious preparation for the

difficulties that would have to be faced. This can be inferred from what took place between 1215 and 1217, when it was decided to go beyond the borders of Italy. The decision was unquestionably grave and compromising. Experience had shown—as echoed again in the *Legend of the Three Companions*—how the friars could often run into unexpected obstacles of every kind. There was even more reason to fear when, in the Pentecost chapter on May 14, 1217, it was decided to send some friars overseas, which at that time meant to the Holy Land. Perhaps it is worth noting here, as the sources make clear, that the expedition was based primarily on a desire to go where Christ had lived and died on the cross. Concomitantly, however, the decision was made to send friars at least into England, France, and Germany, thus advancing the formation of the "provinces" of the order.

During this general chapter, Francis delivered a brief address that fitted fully within the pattern of his goal to be an example and model for everyone. It also shows how imprecise was the information available to him. "My dearest brethren," he said, "I ought to serve as a model and example for all my brothers. I have sent forth my brothers into distant countries, into work, humiliation, hunger, and into who knows what need. To me it seems good and just that I, too, go forth in the same way to some distant province. This seems especially so in order for the brothers to be in a position to put up with their needs and tribulations with greater patience, once they have learned that I too am enduring the same things." Then, following custom, he invoked a common prayer that God inspire him in his choice of a province. After they prayed and reassembled, Francis announced in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, of the Virgin Mary, and of all the saints, that he was choosing the province of France. There Catholic people lived who "especially among other Catholics extended the greatest reverence to the Body of Christ." He would on that account even more gladly stay among them.

Since the *Compilation of Assisi/Legenda Perusina*, which

recounts this episode, then goes on to exalt Francis' devotion to the Eucharist by narrating other edifying episodes, it will not be out of place to recall that his choice had also stemmed from an accomplished fact. As a young merchant, he had listened to his father's stories about France, where he traveled often on business. Likewise, there is no need to forget that Francis knew French, although perhaps not perfectly. Still, he gladly sang in French and had often used that language in presenting himself and his companions as *ioculatores Domini* to the crowds. There is, then, no need to postulate a meeting with Jacques de Vitry, which Thomas of Eccleston seems to do. After all, Francis had learned much about France directly from his parents.

After closing counsels and admonitions, he began his trip with the priest Sylvester as his companion. When they reached Arezzo, they found the city in the grip of one of those tragic quarrels among factions that characterized the early years of the thirteenth century in many Italian cities. These conflicts were signs of the transition from a government by consuls to that by mayors. They also revealed the emergence of the class of merchants and artisans that would later be called "the people."

In this civil fight, Francis recognized all its tragic seriousness from having experienced it personally several years earlier. Upon reaching the outskirts of Arezzo, Francis became aware of the triumph of demons who "were gloating over this discord and were instigating everyone to destroy the city with fire and with other instruments of ruin." He then asked Sylvester, being a priest, to exorcise the demons by his priestly power. Before the gates of the city Friar Sylvester pronounced the formula: "Praised and blessed be our Lord Jesus Christ. By the authority of God almighty, and in virtue of holy obedience to our holy father Francis, I order all demons to leave this city."

Shortly afterward, although Francis could not preach there, a point made clear by the source, Arezzo regained peace and unity. This episode, later elevated by the piety

of the hagiographers to the level of a miracle, deserves to be remembered and studied more closely and with greater attention. It allows us access with some precise insight into the saint's typical religiosity. It shows itself to be extremely complex. One form of it is quite rigorously attached to the scriptural, theological, and liturgical elements such as are found in his short works. Another form is very close to popular religiosity, as appeared in the episode of the triple consultation with the *sortes apostolorum* mentioned earlier. This folk form also stands out in the transformation of a civil war into a demoniac presence to be exorcised, as if it were a matter simply of a possessed individual and not of a city. No less interesting and characteristic is the detail that the exorcism was entrusted to Friar Sylvester. Francis, not having holy orders, does not perform it, but assigns the task to Sylvester, since he is a priest. Sylvester, in turn, while pronouncing the formula of exorcism, invokes almighty God; yet he also takes refuge behind the obedience under which Francis has placed him. We gather that here is a mental dimension in evolution and transformation: while the saint is aware of the grave responsibility he has as leader of his order and feels ever more respect for the Church's organizational and doctrinal structure, he still retains his cultural baggage as a young merchant with all its religious approximations, persistent old beliefs, and mental habits.

Coming from Arezzo, he arrived in Florence, which at that time was in serious trouble with the papacy. It had already been placed under interdict by Innocent III. One reason was the conflict that the city was having with the curia while the latter was setting everything up for the imminent return of the emperor-elect Frederick. Another reason was the internal struggle between Guelphs and Ghibellines. Closer to reality, a further reason for the condemnation was the worry over heresy. One can recall that the Florentine chronology places during these years the arrival in the city of the Patarines and thus of the Cathars.

The negotiations conducted by Cardinal Ugolino had

required much time and hard strategy; then he had to wait around for papal instructions and decisions. These were now all the more important inasmuch as Florence had become a pawn of great importance on the Tuscan chessboard ever since the cardinal's own attempt at a reconciliation between Pisa and Genoa had fallen through. Francis arrived at Florence without, apparently, having previously known the cardinal, to whom, however, he was well known. The cardinal received Francis with a cordial welcome. Right away he wanted to be informed of the reasons for the saint's journey. Upon hearing them, he immediately advised him against it for reasons that we should well examine. We can thereby correct whatever triumphalistic impression may exist concerning the affirmation of the Order of Friars Minor in the bosom of the Church. At the same time, we can see how the pope and the cardinals—or at least some of them—took account of the weight and importance that Francis had for his community. Ugolino told him, "Brother, I do not want you to go over the mountains, because many prelates there and others as well would obstruct the good of your order at the Roman curia. I, along with the other cardinals who love your order, could protect it with greater ease and pleasure if you were to remain within the limits of this territory." Francis, in reply, brought out how mortifying it would be for him to stay in his homeland after having sent his confreres into remote and distant lands. The cardinal came back at him in a tone of reproach, as one who knows to one who does not know and who thus does not see clearly ahead: "Why have you sent your confreres so far away to die of hunger and to suffer so many other tribulations?" At this point the gap with all its meaning becomes evident between the imprudence, the boldness, and the foresight of Francis, with his deep faith in the validity of his action and of his penitential missionary work, and the cardinal's lack of imagination. Ugolino basically does not understand and listens dumbfounded—and perhaps with skepticism—to Francis' impassioned response: "My lord, do you hold or believe

that our Lord has sent the friars only to our land? I tell you in truth that the Lord chose and sent the brothers for the benefit and salvation of the souls of all men throughout the world. They will be welcome not only in countries of believers, but also in those of unbelievers. And that they might observe the promises they made to the Lord, He will give them whatever they need in the lands of unbelievers as well as of believers."

The cardinal did not dare reply, recognizing as he did the validity of Francis' words. However, Francis did not gain permission to leave, and sent Brother Pacificus in his stead to France. He himself returned to Assisi. The meeting he had with the cardinal is obviously reported here in a quick series of salient images. As its very setting implies, the actual encounter must have been longer and more extensive. It clearly had vast repercussions, from what can be inferred from the saint's life afterward and from subsequent events in the order. From then on Francis remained in Italy, with the exception of his journey to the Holy Land. He was always present in person. He was there to guide the lives and activities of all his brothers. He was also there, voluntarily reduced to the rank of simple friar, very attentively following events and sharing in the common lot. He made every effort to prevent circumstances of human will from intervening to change the original driving spirit of his *fraternitas*, now become a *religio*, a true order. Considering Francis' order and instinctive passion for action, this means that the dangers warned against by the cardinal were not petty insinuations by a powerful man of the curia, but were realities that obliged Francis to leave aside his personal and, so to speak, instinctive aspirations in order to remain on watch and to act accordingly. In this way the meeting with Cardinal Ugolino was truly decisive, as has been recently revealed, throughout the rest of Francis' life. Yet it was also decisive in a more specific way. We noted that, shortly before Innocent III, the cardinal John of St. Paul died, leaving the order deprived of the one who had sustained it in its first steps and who had never failed thereafter to guide it with

his protection and counsel. Yet he seemed never to have interfered or in any way to have blocked the plans and initiatives of the *fraternitas* and of its leader. Right after the encounter with Ugolino and the return to Assisi, it must have seemed opportune to gain the protection and assistance of a person of rank who could provide the needed help and support. Francis was fully aware of having promised obedience and respect to the pope, but he also knew which and how many real difficulties were involved in just a periodical relationship with the pontiff. He knew well of the pope's many commitments and incessant concerns, such as the Holy Land and the crusade, the heretics at the greatest point of their expansion, and political affairs.

Thus there emerged, by force of circumstances, the idea of that singular juridical figure that came to be known as the "cardinal protector." The function was not totally absent in the Church's previous history but had never enjoyed any specific, concrete, and above all continuous reality. On this point, as we have noted, we have two distinct traditions in the sources, one represented by the first *Vita* by Thomas of Celano and the other by the *Legend of the Three Companions*, both of which are debatable for various reasons. Thomas' account tends to present Ugolino as taking the initiative to introduce Francis to the pope and as having enabled him to speak in public. From this, supposedly, came the spontaneous request that Ugolino be named cardinal protector. More diffuse and less precise in detail is the account in the *Legend*, which also presents Ugolino as benevolent and friendly toward the order with attentive consideration of its work and activity, with the result that Francis himself, as we will see, requested him as cardinal protector. The problem to be resolved stands before us in these terms: is the Florentine episode that we have just recounted to be considered one of the normal manifestations of Ugolino's activity and work as cardinal protector? Or is the meeting at Florence the very point of departure, the premise for the cordial relationship that became institutionalized

by the request for Ugolino as cardinal protector?

One fact is certain: Francis and Ugolino had never met before Florence. This automatically would rule out the account of the saint's trip to Rome with the events described by Thomas of Celano. On the other hand, a careful reading of the *Legend* uncovers inaccuracies and differences. At first glance, it would lead one to think that the death of the Cardinal of St. Paul was immediately followed by the request for a cardinal protector in a kind of automatic procedure. Upon the death of Cardinal John, Ugolino is supposed to have followed, spontaneously and with good will, the life and activity of Francis and the order. The awareness of his favor would then have generated the proposal to have him as cardinal protector. Could not, then, the counsel provided at Florence and the benign understanding that it inspired have given rise to that friendly attitude that the *Legend* broadly terms *diligere, protegere, favere* (love, protect, sustain)? This would explain why the "man of God," namely, Francis, in coming to recognize Ugolino's importance "since he was well known among the cardinals," visited him with his confreres and received from him a joyous welcome. The cardinal's readiness to give protection was offered spontaneously and freely. The saint not only accepted what the cardinal proposed, but also revealed his desire to have him as "father and protector of our order." He proceeded to assure him that all the friars would keep his remembrance in their prayers. He then invited him to come to the next Pentecost chapter—probably in 1218. The *Legend* adds that, from then on, the cardinal took part in every general chapter, welcomed by the friars with festive solemnity.

This simple account of the circumstances that led up to the naming of Ugolino as cardinal protector is sufficient by itself to brush aside the thesis of Sabatier concerning a conspiracy of some sort in the curia with the aim of taking Francis and his Friars Minor in hand and bending them to the curia's wishes. Curiously, Sabatier himself, who clearly was the first to emphasize and state the importance

of the encounter at Florence, and who studied and interpreted the saint's psychology with great finesse, did not take into account an important point. This dialogue had its firm and precise points, but above all displayed Francis' solid and unshakable confidence in divine Providence, which had never failed to help his friars. The dialogue thus demonstrated that Francis was able to yield to the reasonableness of persuasive arguments, such as those that led him to remain in Italy and Umbria. This was to avoid possible dangers and threats to his order. However, he did not at all yield on the essential point. He himself remained at Assisi but did not recall the friars sent out on mission. Even though he decided not to go to France, he still sent someone else, namely, Brother Pacificus, in his place.

We need to close on this point by noting that Ugolino, just as the sources tell us, supported and sustained the development of the order of Friars Minor. He also sincerely loved Francis and admired his holiness and particularly his heroic life (here we refer especially to his final years, about which we have yet to speak). Yet, as it turned out, the cardinal never succeeded in having any decisive influence capable of changing anything essential to the vision and apostolate of the Franciscan movement.

The Franciscan sources otherwise agree, with different shadings, in giving weight and importance to Ugolino. They also concur by not attributing any intervention to him of any magnitude. The only exception was the matter, with all its overtones, of Francis' return to Assisi and renouncement of his journey to France. In contrast, it is important to stress here for the first time—although we will return to this matter shortly—that the group of friars who passed on their memories and marked them with the expression, *"Nos qui cum eo fuimus"* [we who were with him], make no mention at all of any decisive intervention by the cardinal protector. They do, however, underscore in several situations the *condescensio* or benevolance of Francis in meeting the needs and desires of the friars, even when at times he had acted contrary to

his wishes either out of caring paternal flexibility or in order to avoid the scandal of dissent and conflict within the *fraternitas*.

It seems possible to conclude that the internal evolution of the Franciscan Order, with all its gradually more complex and distinct articulation, was not, then, a sinister consequence—at least while the saint was alive—of interference by the curia through the efforts of Cardinal Ugolino. The evolution was rather the result of the resistance that the friars tended to raise against the saint's ideal as originally conceived by him. At least one aspect of this resistance proved to be truly relevant. We indicated earlier how the case in question was resolved. It dealt with Peter Cattani and Sylvester as priests who had requested entry into the *fraternitas*. In all simplicity, greater importance was given to the passage into the midst of outcasts than to the clerical condition. Was it possible, however, to maintain this attitude? The number of priests who had entered the order had grown remarkably. They found themselves at times living in social contexts that were profoundly different from that of a communal Italian city.

The conflict that Sabatier posited between the curia and Francis, as seen from this viewpoint, loses its somewhat petty meaning of curial imbroglio and of priestly meddling at high levels. It takes on the deeper and, for Francis, much more tragic meaning of the clash of a man and an ideal against his time and its concrete circumstances. We do not hesitate to term it a gigantic and tragic clash. In it the young merchant, frail and delicate in body, displayed superhuman energy and power of resistance in the certainty of his conviction. For it he had renounced all things and sacrificed himself and his life. Yet particular developments seemed to have obstinately refused to recognize this. Francis himself, when his certainty seemed to waver, experienced his own garden of Gethsemani, his moment of doubt, but did not let himself be dragged down by it. This gave rise to the tragic aspect that in so many ways characterized the last decade of Francis' life.

It seemed to be his most triumphant period, yet in reality it was the most bitterly disappointing, although he never surrendered or gave in. It is necessary to point out that, among a thousand difficulties with the latent but still live tension that was building up between the friars, especially the ones furthest away, and their founder, he never lost confidence in certain and unfailing divine help. The world of psychological and physical sufferings that he traversed between 1216 and 1226 was understood to be his motive and means for remaining closer to the outcasts and the unfortunate. He deliberately wanted to move among them and be ever more united with his model Christ crucified.

We have put aside the priestly conspiracy, presented in such a suggestive and persuasive way by Sabatier, as being nonexistent in reality. We have brought out instead the incisive and urgent importance of the ever more intense influx of new friars, especially from the distant regions of Italy and from the transalpine lands. A fundamental but rapid outline becomes necessary to examine the events involved in this expansion in their essential facets. We can thus gain some points of reference useful for examining and appreciating in full the meaning of the tension that was developing between these new friars and Francis, their master and example.

2 *Beyond Italy: France, England, Germany, and Hungary*

We have already noted that, in the general chapter of Pentecost of 1217, the partition was proceeding of all western Christendom into a series of provinces. They thereby determined that a group of friars should go forth to the different countries. Even though Francis returned to Assisi and sent Brother Pacificus to France in his stead, the others obeyed and, as we will see, did not fail to reach their destinations.

Fortunately we have extremely valuable accounts of this first expansion from sources close to the events with generally accurate information. We refer to two short

works: one by Thomas of Eccleston, *De adventu fratrum minorum in Anglia* [On the Arrival of the Friars Minor in England]; the other by Jordan of Giano, *Chronica.* The latter serves as a valuable witness not only for the information that he provides us, but also because he personally lived in the extraordinary climate in which the expansion of the order was decided and put into effect. He was, as his name suggests, a native of Giano, a place not far from Assisi. He was personally received by St. Francis into the Friars Minor, probably around 1217. As he himself tells us, it was only by chance that he was not among the first Franciscan martyrs in Morocco who were sent among unbelievers in 1219. He stayed in Italy and seemed destined to remain there forever until, in the general chapter of 1221, he was chosen—by his own admission, against his will—to go to Germany. He made his way there in the autumn and winter of 1220. Ordained a priest in the spring of 1223, perhaps at Speyer, he stayed within Germany, moving from one place to another until his death at a ripe old age of between seventy-five and eighty (the date cannot be determined exactly). His body was buried in Germany at Magdeburg. The *Chronica*, written as he was advancing in age, was not intended to be historically oriented or arranged. As has been correctly pointed out, it was an *Erlebnisbericht*, an account of life as one lived it. There is no doubt that its importance lies not only in a series of events, but also and above all in the attitudes and sentiments in which they are remembered and shared. This approach naturally has its repercussions in the work as a whole. The first part, stemming from when he was more youthful, more curious, and more attentive to the events involving his confreres, is relatively long and provides us helpful and valuable information, including internal events within the order. The latter part follows upon his own personal worries and difficulties (which chronologically are not important for this study, since they deal with times after Francis' death). Here he limits his field to Brandenburg, where he spent the last years of his life.

Completely different was the destiny and, in some ways, the personality and work of Thomas (said to be from Eccleston, even though he himself never states his birthplace). We know nothing about him, partly because he speaks very little about himself in his work. However, what he says about his entry into the order is important. He belonged to that sphere of new friars in the order that we have already mentioned: people who had never seen or known Francis or Italy, and who had learned of the new Franciscan ideal only indirectly, indeed, very indirectly. He reports that he came under the influence of those who, having entered the order in Paris, later crossed over to England to spread the order there. He became a Friar Minor sometime between 1230 and 1232 and began immediately to write his work. This indicates that he already had cultural training and formation, and thus would not have been very young when he decided to enter religious life. He remained in it until his death, which some clues lead us to place shortly after 1259. It seems certain that London was his residence.

His work is quite different from that of Jordan. His purpose is not to recount a life experience, but to write a work of edification. In terms of literary vigor, Jordan is the more plainly narrative in general treatment of the material. The Umbrian friar never loses a certain critical attitude toward his German surroundings, even though he lived there for several decades. The Englishman, even while he recognized the limits and defects of his confreres, nonetheless seeks to excuse them if not downplay them. This shows us clearly, even several years after Francis' death, that it was the complex body of friars that impelled the order in directions that, although not by much, diverged from the founder's ideal.

Unfortunately, we lack similar accounts from France, although much information is available from that time and place. We must note that two separate provinces formed there rather quickly: one in southern France, called *provincia Provinciae* (province of Provence), the other in northern France, *provincia Franciae.* It was in France that

the friars experienced their first serious difficulties. As a background, we should remember that for a long time (practically since the end of the crusade against the Albigensians) the heretics who had received the *consolamentum*, the so-called perfect ones, wore a distinctive habit of rough gray cloth together with a cincture. In the prevailing idiom "robed heretics" signified these perfect ones. When the friars in France arrived at Paris with their absolutely uncustomary habit, they were quickly presumed to be heretics and were haled before the city's bishop, Pierre de Nemours. He called together in council —in a kind of trial, although apparently an informal one— the university professors, who interrogated the friars and wanted information about their rule. Despite the favorable result of this inquiry, the bishop, being still unsure, chose to refer the question to the pope. The pope reassured the bishop by explaining who they were in a letter entitled *Pro dilectis filiis* dated May 29, 1220. Whether the friars had gone to Paris, as had St. Dominic to Bologna, because the city was a famous university center, or had gone there simply by chance, cannot be known. However, the account of these events would incline one to accept the latter hypothesis.

The story in Mediterranean France was on the whole a different one, easier and more favorable, since the political situation and civil life there were such that they ruled out the most serious difficulties. Despite the crusade against the Albigensians and the war that followed in its wake, the heretics enjoyed complete tranquillity in everyday life. In that region one can believe without difficulty that the friars were welcomed with favor by the people. They surely established friendly relations with the populace in short order. It is worth noting that the friars' leader, John of Penna, stayed thirty years in Provence.

Much more difficult were the beginnings in Germany and Hungary. Into Germany was sent a native of the Italian Marches known by the name of John of Penna (evidently not the same person as his above-mentioned namesake), along with some twenty friars. They knew

neither the country nor the language, and simply relied upon whatever seemed to work. Early on it seemed that everything was going well, because they noticed that whenever they answered *ja* (the German "Yes"), they were made welcome and treated as guests. They gathered that the word must have had some friendly meaning. Unfortunately, when it came out that they were Italians, they were thought possibly to be heretics. The question was directly put to them: were they indeed heretics? Their answer, once again, was *ja*. The consequences were unexpected. "Some were clubbed, others imprisoned, others stripped and carted before a judge, ending up serving as objects of mockery and ridicule for everyone around." Thus forced to return to Italy, they judged the situation to be so dangerous that they did not dare venture back as a group. Some who returned alone did so out of a desire for martyrdom.

Even more dramatic was the scene in Hungary, retold by Jordan of Giano. A Hungarian bishop who, it seems, was favorable to them had a group of friars cross the Adriatic. Divided into small groups, they were left to themselves, and traveled across the vast plain. They came upon some shepherds who, confusing them with who knows whom, unleashed their dogs on them and chased them off with roasting spits. Possibly they were afraid that they were outlaws or sorcerers. The friars, however, thought that they wanted their tunics, and took them off to give them to the shepherds. This did not placate their hostile attitude. The friars then proceeded to take off their drawers and their footwear. In no way, however, could they calm the frenzied hostility of the shepherds. Finally, after losing their garments several times, they were forced to return to Italy.

Even more tragic was the lot of the friars who were sent to Spain. They were driven to continue to Morocco, where they were martyred. The only one who had better luck overseas was Brother Elias who went to Palestine where he met Cesarius of Speyer, a distinguished personality who had completed his theological studies at Paris. His

guide and master there had been his renowned fellow citizen, Conrad of Speyer, who later became bishop of Hildesheim in 1221.

We pick up from all these events a vague, composite echo, yet one that is accurate on the whole. It resonates in the quick but effective presentation given in the *Legend of the Three Companions,* which shows the bitter and largely unsuccessful effect of this first experience outside of Italy. It can well serve as a conclusion that clearly explains the arresting of the order beyond the Alps: "In some provinces the friars were indeed received, but were not allowed to build or set up houses in which to dwell; they were driven out of other provinces or not even allowed to enter because the inhabitants feared they might be heretics. This happened because, when Pope Innocent III approved the order and rule of the friars, he had not confirmed it in writing; and through this omission the friars suffered many tribulations at the hands of both the clergy and the laity. This was also the reason why they had to fly from various provinces. Harried and distressed, they were set upon by thieves who stripped and robbed and beat them, and they returned to blessed Francis very embittered. They suffered such treatment in various countries north of the Alps, in Germany and Hungary, and also in others."

This is, without doubt, a very significant passage. It is clear that what had befallen them was a harsh blow to their dreams, when we realize that the *Legend* gives us information that was not yet written down in the dramatic accounts by Jordan of Giano. The explanation given, i.e., the ill-defined institutional situation of the order, is certainly of value. It must have weighed heavily upon Francis and upon his reluctance, never denied, to seek and receive from the curia any "written" privilege, some kind of precise document that would guarantee the order in some way. Right here is one of the first collisions that we have mentioned between the ideal and the real. The fraternal penitential community, at least in its area of origin and in the surrounding regions, could apparently subsist by

the plan/rule as approved by the pope and with the progressive adjustments made from time to time in the general chapters. Now it had to be structured more precisely and organically. The original community had to turn into a real religious order. For many reasons, it was natural that Ugolino of Ostia had worked in this direction and that he had pushed Francis to recognize the forces in play. Perhaps no one knew better than Ugolino how abnormal—from a canonical point of view—was the situation of the order. It existed *de facto* (about this there was no doubt), as seen by its growing success wherever it appeared without giving rise to misunderstandings or mistakes. Yet in no way could it be incorporated into any of the four orders already approved. In comparison with them, it displayed some deep and irreducible differences, which we can quickly and usefully examine.

Even though the Friars Minor sought out isolated or peripheral places and often gave themselves over to contemplative meditation, they could not really call themselves hermits. The simple fact was that they went out daily from their hermitage and mingled with the crowds in order to exhort them to penance. That some of them, beginning with Francis, took on for certain periods the eremetical life in the technical and precise meaning of the term still does not matter much, for this was only a temporary form of eremitism. Regarding monasticism, the Friars Minor lacked not only the essential requirement of *stabilitas,* i.e., the permanent bond to the monastery, they also lacked the abbatial hierarchical structure, both in reference to the distribution of abbots for each monastery or group of monasteries (as among the Cluniacs, for example), and in reference to the powers of the abbot. Certainly, Francis insisted on obedience toward superiors, but a superior was above all to be the servant of all his confreres. Francis, however, affirmed a great limitation, later codified regularly, by saying that any command ought to be obeyed unless it contradicted the salvation of one's soul and respect for the rule. Another difference, even more significant, was that monks had a community of

goods, often a conspicuous one, which normally assured them of complete economic self-sufficiency. The Friars Minor, however, in order to affirm their condition as penitents on the margin of society, rejected any possession even if offered to them. This let them live by their labor and by alms that they would ask for from door to door.

Nor could the friars be assimilated into any of the kinds of canons that existed. A presupposition that in one sense characterized canons in general was that they were required to belong to the clerical state. With this was associated the obligation to common life, involving the care of souls only and always as a function of priestly activity. The friars differed here in that they maintained above all an absolute equality between clerics and non-clerics; even more, they renounced all forms of property and declined the work of the care of souls. Moreover, their fundamental purpose was direct, continuous, and immediate action, even outside of church buildings, in the midst of crowds for the spiritual renewal of the faithful by leading them to conversion and penance. And last, they differed in their attitude toward poverty. For the Friars Minor, it was "total" always.

Finally, they did not fit into the priestly order, for reasons that are obvious from all the foregoing. The priesthood—and this doubtless applied to all others dedicated to religious life as hermits, monks, and canons—constituted a social category (or in the language of the twelfth century and the Middle Ages in general, an *ordo*) with a specific place and with rights, privileges, and official recognition. Francis of Assisi knew all this very well even before his conversion. It was precisely all this that he had wanted to avoid in order to bring about something profoundly different and new. In his sensitivity as a man living in the world, as a believer among believers, he had felt called by God to a new apostolate. The example provided by monks and hermits was surely important and valid, but it stayed closed behind monastery walls and, in particular, was not shared nor could it be. Canons and priests were the administrators of the sacraments.

They clearly worked among the masses, but this activity was included in their duties, which the new crowds in the new cities saw, as always, reduced to the essential minimum and, in many cities, below this minimum. Francis, however, asserted a need and a religious format that was not directed to them while they were already assembled in church for Mass or for other rites. He wanted to talk with them and give them counsel. The good example of authentic and total Christianity should have had an attractive power needed to convince inert and indifferent individuals who were always ready to defer their conversion. This did not mean that they were to present themselves as intentional exemplars, or that they should lose anything of their own personal spiritual concentration or of their own rigorous asceticism. Rather, they were to enter into it deeply, keeping in mind not only past church tradition, as noble as it may have been, but also a future spirituality that, without losing anything of what was already established and functioning, would be able to go further in reaching the hearts of the faithful.

The dramatic experiences mentioned are proof positive that, while imbued with a sincere and deeply intended call for peace, Francis' position was revolutionary. It came across to the thirteenth-century Church as truly disturbing, even through the primitive rule. He had made the rule simple and elastic, intending it to be a permanent stimulus, just as the gospel really is. He did not intend it to be a norm, and in some respects it is an antirule (it is not without significance that it became obsolete once it had outlived its function). Francis himself was accepted throughout Italy, which was agitated by so many ferments of restlessness, as a possible catalyst for aimless energies. He was seen as being able to attract, restrain, and direct any souls in search of a different religious life, although not without hesitation and worry. The great surprise was the number and variety of these souls who wanted to express their vitality and spiritual involvement by doing penance and by exhorting others to the same. Perhaps it is not sufficiently appreciated—nor do we have enough

data to make any approximate estimate—that not only laymen of every social condition, but also many clerics wanted to enter and take part in the *fraternitas* and later in the *religio* of the Order of Friars Minor. This was not out of a desire to be humiliated, nor was it for masochistic pleasure from self-imposed suffering. This notion has been advanced by ignorant individuals now and then with regard to Francis and even more concerning those who followed him. Instead, it was the recovery of the human condition of suffering, modeled on that of Christ and, as by him, offered for all to lead them to salvation.

All these reasons help us to understand why the Church had some concern over the existence of the order, without at all failing to have in other respects the sincerest admiration and esteem for its founder. As noted earlier, the juridical anomalies were such a source of worry that these very anomalies and abnormalities had contributed in part—as clearly shown in the *Legend of the Three Companions*—to the failure of the attempts in Germany and Hungary. The events in France—the examination of the friars in Paris, as well as their welcome in southern France where the religious situation was similar to that of Italy—provide further proof. In Germany, however, the clerical and monastic world was locked into its structures and was close to the political power, by which it was aided and supported. Germany was alert to any heretical infiltration, fearing most of all any Catharist influence. The fear was enough to lead them into incidents of persecution that provoked the restraining intervention of Pope Gregory IX in 1231-32.

The question of the rule, then, was not, as has been often asserted, that it was the instrument of coercion and later of utilization of Francis on the part of the Church. Rather, it was the means to regularize the life of the Order of Friars Minor. It gave the order the right of presence and action within Christianity as it existed not only in Italy but throughout the entire West. The task of carefully examining, validating, and vouching for the order had been carried out on their own by the bishop of Paris and

the university professors there in their own inquiry. The result was that they sought approval and confirmation of the order from Rome. The need now was for an inquiry to be conducted on an organic and global level at Rome itself. Only Rome could officially declare the existence of this religious entity that included both men and women, but that also strove to draw around itself other people. These others, while continuing to live in the world, were those who wanted to associate themselves in some way, through works of penance, with the community of Friars Minor. They made up the first nucleus of what would come to be called the Third Order.

Strange as it may seem—we can insist here on a fundamental point that is historically essential and decisive—the most serious obstacle did not proceed from the curia, since the pope and curial officials were basically favorable. Nor did it come from Francis himself, since he, as the son of a merchant and a merchant himself, was too much of a realist not to take into account certain inevitable demands. The obstacle was raised from within the ranks of monks, canons, and priests who clung to centuries-old ecclesiastical traditions. They rebelled against a novelty that seemed to be shaking these traditions. Indeed, it really was shaking them. One example would be to think of what would have been the normal reaction of a bishop faced with the arrival of a group of Friars Minor. To be sure, they would request authorization to "preach" and would profess the most reverent respect for him. The truth was, however, that they would be outside of his control. They moved around from one place to another without stability and without fixed residence. Even when they did have a residence, it would have no meaning for him: he could ask for nothing from them, since they had nothing. A bishop used to the old monastic world would have missed among the friars the practice of the consecration of an abbot. He would also miss the visitation of a monastery, which still was the practice in some way, out of custom, even for monasteries exempt from episcopal jurisdiction. We are not dealing here with the

exaggerations of historians trying to affirm and establish the novelty of Francis and his movement and to exaggerate the opposition and contrasts that this novelty aroused. The fact is that this opposition, more or less underground and implicit, was never lacking. It reached such a point toward the middle of the thirteenth century that it succeeded in making an impression and partly convincing Pope Innocent IV, a great jurist, toward the end of his life, when he promulgated the bull *Etsi animarum* on November 20, 1254. (It was immediately revoked by his successor, Alexander IV.) Later, at the Second Council of Lyon, in 1274, both Franciscans and Dominicans were nearly suppressed. It was only the teaching and skill of Cardinal Bonaventure of Bagnoregio, supported by Pope Gregory X and joined with the energy of Humbert of Romans, the Dominican general, that managed to avoid a catastrophe. As it was, many of the lesser movements that had developed around the Franciscans ended up eliminated, as is known from history.

The need for a rule, then, stood out as a peremptory necessity. The difficulty lay in composing it. On this point, hundreds of pages have been written and infinite discussions have been held. All end up more or less probable and arguable. This is a period for which we do not have sources upon which we could construct a hypothesis either now or eventually. It seems that our only orientation comes from a clue that is provided incidentally, and thus with no intention, in the *Legend of the Three Companions.* It tells us, in speaking of the rejection of all possessions by Francis and his first companions, that he made everyone alert to avoid the handling of money. It continues in these words: "This was true to such an extent that he especially recommended poverty in all his rules. He was especially concerned that they avoid money. He drew up other rules and tried them out, until he composed the one that he ultimately gave to the friars."

Along with this testimony from a biographer-hagiographer there is the one given by the last edition of

Francis' writings. It contains unquestionable traces of another *Regula non bullata;* although distinct, it certainly bears some relation to the one that has survived to our times.

Having made these points, we hold that it is of no purpose for us to enter into discussion on the numerous details that come to us from one source or another on one point or another. Nor will we talk about this or that modification that might have been added or removed under varying circumstances and under the influence of this or that person, not without schemes and even tricks, such as that of a text made to disappear or mislaid by Brother Elias. At worst it all means that these rules were undoubtedly discussed in the various general chapters and that they benefitted, among other things, from the intervention of those *boni viri* [good men], i.e., those experts in canon law who were mentioned by Jacques de Vitry in the years 1214-16. That one of them could have been Peter Cattani, one of Francis' first companions, is very plausible, since Francis had great trust in him. We cannot, however, push this beyond the level of a hypotheses, especially since Peter died rather early—March 2, 1221. He thus could not have taken part in the final and definitive edition, the one we call *Regula bullata.*

While we believe it is impossible to outline the historical evolution of the Rule of the Friars Minor, we also hold that the two main points of reference can be identified. The antitheses between these points, along with their creative forces, brought into final form the two documents that have come down to us, the *Regula non bullata* as well as the *Regula bullata.* The two points of reference are the ideal that Francis kept with all his tenacity, and the need for a document that would be stimulating and open. Its openness would look to impulses of generous dedication to one's neighbor, lively adherence to the example of Christ, love of poverty, of sacrifice, and of the choice of condition (which we have mentioned often) as an essential element of his conversion. His ever deepening worry, as his life was nearing its end, was the lapse of the

order into a *formal* obedience to a *formal* rule.

He feared that such formalism would lack the living and animating spirit of the Friar Minor, which he wanted to be a stimulus and leaven within Christian society, especially since it was close to outcasts. He feared that what should be the drive and internal call of love and dedication for lepers, the sick, the miserable, and the suffering, could decay to the level of weary obedience and of duty performed and valid simply because it was imposed.

Here, frankly, is the battleground of Francis' last years. It became his torment, his anguish, and his anxiety. It drove him to devise ways to prevent any interior decay, not apparent to the outside, from developing. A particular source of his worry, one that had been with him for some time, was evident from the point at which he had refused to accept one of the four rules already approved: he saw juridical norms as tending to regulate, fix, systematize, and finally kill the living thrust of the soul. With juridical norms—as we mentioned earlier—there went a risk that was perhaps even greater: the explanatory gloss, the comment that would end up annulling or modifying the deep sense of the norms, even of the best of norms.

In combatting this risk, Francis consumed his energy. Physically, he was surely weak, but spiritually and mentally, as far as we can tell from the sources, his powers were intact. We should take into account that many of his writings, while dictated to secretaries or collaborators, date from this last phase of his life.

Francis took on the difficult commitment, loaded with tension between himself and the others, for the composition of some norms more or less organically arranged, that could serve as a rule. At the same time, he turned his thoughts to a matter that he felt a duty which he could not and should not neglect: a journey to the Holy Land. We say specifically a journey, because it seems that Francis was not particularly inclined to make a pilgrimage, in the usual and technical sense of the term. Certainly, as a young man, prior to his conversion, he had visited St.

Peter's in Rome. When he returned there with his companions to receive approval for his plan from the pope, he visited the *limina apostolorum* [thresholds of the apostles] with them, i.e., he made visits to the basilicas that were normal stops for pilgrims. However, it does not seem that he was among those who would undertake special trips to this or that sanctuary. In reality, the journey to the Holy Land meant something else to Francis. He saw it as the greatest test of his life. Around that time, his companions in Morocco had died for the faith, after having gone among unbelievers to preach to them. In the face of this supreme act of martyrdom, he once again had to be the head and the example. It was he who had dreamed of glory in following a count (one of the Gentile line, otherwise forgotten by history). He could not and would not stay away from a place where other believers were suffering for Christ and placing themselves on the line for him.

In this way, Francis achieved a recovery and rescue of his failed journey to France, and affirmed his ideal of poverty and peace. He embarked with nothing, but especially without arms. He was strong in his faith and sustained by his courage alone. We shall see how and why.

The desire, then, to tread the soil where Christ had lived and was crucified, the hope to confront the unbelievers and be martyred by them, the need for example: this time nothing could hold Francis back. We do not know if Ugolino of Ostia tried once again to restrain him. The decision had been made. Now it was a matter of carrying it out.

VIII

In the Holy Land and in Italy; from Martyrdom to Malady

1 In Europe and in Palestine

In his first *Vita*—but not in his second—Thomas of Celano alone states that Francis had actually tried to reach the Holy Land well before 1219. About the time that Clare became associated with the community of brothers, "in the sixth year since his conversion," he is supposed to have embarked on a ship to cross the Adriatic, thereby reaching the coast of Dalmatia at an undetermined place. There he is supposed to have learned that it would have been difficult that year to find passage to Syria. He decided then to return to Italy and stowed away on another ship headed for Ancona. He is said to have succeeded in landing there, thanks to the help of a merciful divine Providence. This was in spite of the hostility of the sailors, whom he was unable to pay for his passage.

Having failed in his attempt by sea—still according to the lone testimony of Thomas—Francis is said to have tried a land route, out of his desire for martyrdom. Not long after this first voyage, he is reported as having set out by land, taking the roads of Italy and France, along the Mediterranean coast, and arriving in Spain with the intention of reaching Morocco and of converting the caliph Mohamed-ben-Nasser. Not long before, the caliph had been defeated at Las Navas de Tolosa by the Spaniards

under the command of Peter II of Aragon on July 16, 1212. Once again, Francis did not complete his journey. Along the way—Thomas says it was in Spain—he fell sick and was forced to return home.

Nobody has ever cast any doubt on these two attempts, nor do we want to seem hypercritical, but we cannot fail to note that no trace of all this can be found in the other sources not based on Thomas. In particular, the *Legend of the Three Companions* says nothing about it, even though it focused closely on those years of Francis' life, still centered on Assisi. It is true that the short absence for his voyage to Dalmatia and his return to Ancona could have disappeared from the record; relatively speaking, it was a matter of a short time, just some weeks. It is not easy, however, to comprehend how no one else would have made note of an absence from Assisi that could not have been any less than several months. Without denying credibility to Thomas, it may suffice to think that the illness struck the saint not really in Spain, but before he arrived there, or even not long after his departure. At any rate, it is interesting to realize that the purpose of these trips was not pilgrimage but martyrdom. It will help here to remember that, from the eleventh century onward, the value of martyrdom flourished again and was vividly asserted, as a repercussion of the crusades. Many elements tend in this direction. It was not that its importance was ever forgotten or underestimated during the centuries that followed the persecutions of the early centuries of the Church. However, it certainly occurred less frequently and, by force of circumstances in that epoch, was less possible. Monasticism, however, on all levels and in all its forms, tended to portray itself as a daily martyrdom, a continuous one of penance and mortification that in some way took the place of martyrdom by blood. In fact, the entire Irish monastic tradition, hardly one of the lesser traditions, had elaborated a theory of monastic life as martyrdom, with gradual steps progressing from asceticism up to the death of Christ, thus preaching faith in him. Nor were these simple proposals without any

reduction into practical reality. Evidence of this is seen in the courage and boldness with which these monks went among pagans and, in some cases, ended up as martyrs. This is the lesson gained from the best-known and most famous example, that of Boniface.

Besides by the monks, the value and importance of martyrdom is confirmed around the year 1000 by another example, that of St. Adalbert of Prague. There were other martyred princes and bishops, such as St. Stanislaus in Poland and St. Gerard in Hungary. The mysticism of martyrdom, however, was picked up and relived in earnest during the crusades; those who would fight the crusade and would die in battle were martyrs. It is not surprising that, during the first crusade, the holy lance that had pierced the side of Jesus Christ was miraculously (as it was said) recovered. Moreover, during this same epoch, the belief was asserted by heretics in the west, as part of their aggravated rigorism, that the only sure guarantee of salvation was martyrdom. This belief then extended—and here is not the place to examine the matter—to the Catharist ritual martyrdom, that of suicide, which among them was called *endura* (penance), as the supreme form of expiation. Although we will not go into specific instances here, we can at least make mention of two Italian episodes that had wide repercussions: one was the assassination of Avialdo by his adversaries in Milan, causing him to be considered a martyr. The other involved Peter Parenzo in the very early years of the thirteenth century who was killed by a conspiracy of heretics and feudal lords rioting in Orvieto, not very far from Assisi.

Francis, however, seems to have been especially fascinated by martyrdom in the East. He looked to martyrdom not so much in itself, which was the hope of the Irish monks, but rather as a possible consequence of courageously taking on a missionary task to convert unbelievers. This is the general impression gained from the saint's conduct and from his personal attitude that ruled out any gesture that was in any way provocative or defiant.

With the journey decided upon, Francis carefully apportioned responsibilities to those who had to substitute for him during his absence, since he realized that he was already at the head of a complex order with many members. He divided up the duties between two of the friars in whom he could repose the necessary trust: Matthew of Narni and Gregory of Naples. The former was to remain at the Portiuncula, which was still the center and the point of reference for the whole order. His task was to give general attention to whatever came up and to receive and speak personally with any friars who so requested, just as Francis himself had been doing all along. The latter, Gregory, was to be a kind of visitor moving from one location to another in Italy. The places beyond the Alps were still few and not very important. We will see how these two vicars provoked various disorders by their actions, compelling Francis to return swiftly.

Francis set out at a time when the Holy Land was, without a doubt, going through one of the most difficult periods of its history. We noted earlier that the fourth crusade had ended in failure and that Honorius III, shortly after his election as pope, intended to marshal aid for the East. To this end, he sent Cardinal Ugolino of Ostia to make peace among the conflicting Italian communes in order to secure arms and financial aid from them. During this diplomatic mission—mentioned earlier—Ugolino halted Francis at Florence while on his way to France. Perhaps, however, he encouraged him by word and action to journey to the Holy Land after appropriate preparation.

Men, materials, and money were collected and put at the disposal of Cardinal Pelagius Galvani, the bishop of Albano. He was perhaps a holy man but was not at all expert on the situation in the East. There the various Christian princes, the religious orders of knights, and the ambitious leaders from the West struggled to assert on a political and military level their own points of view, which always coincided neatly with their own interests. As papal legate, Pelagius was surely not in a position to control

matters. He lacked the personal capacity and the energy to affirm his authority, and would lean upon one after another of the competing groups. He did, however, have a bad idea to suggest, which at first seemed a good one. It was a maneuver to alleviate the pressure of the Moslem forces against Palestine by attacking the important and fortified Egyptian city of Damietta. This would have forced the country's sovereign—al-Kamil, king since 1218 in both the Holy Land and Egypt, and in trouble for years with his brothers and other pretenders to the throne—to send at least some of his troops there.

Various sources provide information about these events. One of them is, again, Jacques de Vitry in a letter and in his *Historia occidentalis* [Western History], which is particularly valuable for the history of Francis and of his order. Another source is the *Chronica* of Jordan of Giano. In retelling the early times of the mission of the Friars Minor in Germany, he manages to insert among his memoirs these particular events which fall chronologically right between the first and second expedition of the friars beyond the Alps. In comparison with these precise and detailed testimonies, (it must be said that Thomas' *Vita prima*, literarily ornate but of weak historical consistency, loses some of its value.)

We do not know how Francis, accompanied by Peter Cattani, traveled to the Holy Land. In all probability he went along with the reinforcements from the Italian cities whom Honorius III had sent. Francis joined Brother Elias, who had been sent to the East by the chapter of 1217. During his stay, he had succeeded in recruiting into the order Caesarius of Speyer, a preeminent personality and a man of high-level university education with a fine background in exegesis and theology. Francis must have arrived at Damietta when the siege of the city was in its initial phase. Jacques de Vitry speaks of him as being already on hand in his "Letter VI." Jacques gives the impression of coming upon someone who was a source of puzzlement, if not of trouble.

At this point, we have to take a position concerning

doubts about this letter that were raised first by Golubovich and then by others. They have pointed out—with good reason—that the passage cited from this letter expresses a judgment very different from the earlier one in his letter of 1216. However, there he was speaking of the "brothers and sisters minor" and not of Francis personally. In any event, he was commenting on a movement that seemed destined to be limited to Italy. Even more important, the judgment seemed to differ from what Jacques himself wrote about Francis in his *Historia occidentalis*, portraying him there in an extremely favorable light. These scholars advance a series of philological data that do have weight to them (a possible interpolation would have to have occurred about the same time as the letter was written, since it exists in a document dating from that period). However, none of these scholars took into account a series of concomitant circumstances that help us understand Jacques de Vitry's poor psychological disposition. The letter is addressed, with the same date and with only minor variations, to three different parties: Pope Honorius III, Jacques' faithful in Belgium, and the abbess Agnes of the Cistercian women's monastery of Aywières. In the part written for all of them, Jacques, already bishop of Acre and thus directly interested in the military events he was reporting, relates that the conquest of Damietta, which he presents as a firm *fait accompli*, was made possible by God's help. The passage reserved for the pope then goes into more details of a military nature, and the passage to his friends and faithful expresses his good wishes to them. However, to the same friends and to the abbess he adds his reference to Francis. It is a mention that arises from and is, so to speak, framed by two events that were unpleasant for him but very significant for us. The good bishop states that the priest Rainer, prior of St. Michael's, had become a Friar Minor. Since he knows well that his correspondents have no idea who the Minors are, he is compelled to go into explanations of the order that lead to Francis. In speaking of the saint, he reveals his state of mind as in many ways oscillating between

vexation and admiration, between the concerns of a prelate and the admission, even though with clenched teeth, of the attractive power of this new religious order. The passage culminates in a final statement laced with annoyance: "To this order, mentioned above, our cleric Colin English gave himself along with two of our other companions, namely, Master Michael and Don Matthew, to whom I had entrusted the care of the Church of the Holy Cross. I am barely succeeding in holding on to the cantor and Henry and some others." After so many defections on account of Francis and his friars, it would have been very difficult for Jacques de Vitry to have been well disposed. One can note how many problems the unanticipated loss of co-workers must have caused him, especially in Palestine, where they were irreplaceable and thus valuable.

Still—and this is important in the passage in question—he related a significant episode of an initiative of Francis after having expressed his worry over the ease (which to him seemed to be frivolity) with which the Minors accepted friars and then sent them two by two only to Francis, for his attention. (According to Friar Elias, a person who was pure could begin to act without further preparation.) "Their master, the founder of the order, came to our army fired with the zeal of faith. He was not afraid to pass over to the enemy's army. He preached the word of God to the Saracens for several days without great result. However, the sultan, the king of Egypt, asked him in private to beseech the Lord in his name that he might be divinely inspired to be able to cling to the religion that pleased God the most."

This testimony is fundamental from many points of view. It is even more valid than the correlated passage in his *Historia occidentalis* since it is more immediate and direct. One point, upon which we need not dwell, is the chronological data that Jacques provides. Another point is his confirmation of Francis' total, deep, and firm attitude of peace. From the French prelate's words emerges, with unmistakable clarity, the fact that Francis did not desire

or receive any armed protection or safe-conduct. In the midst of all-out military action, he moved only by the ardor of his faith and by his missionary spirit. Even the Muslims were his brothers, and it was necessary to show them the true way to salvation, which only Jesus Christ could give. In any case, it is hard to understand how he managed to reach the presence of Malek al-Kamil. We get no help from Jordan of Giano, when in his *Chronica* he says something about Francis' having shouted, "Sultan! Sultan!" until he succeeded in being led to him. That he really was there and did indeed speak with him is beyond doubt. Further proof of this was first pointed out by Louis Massignon and recently confirmed by Francesco Gabriel. It is possible to find a specific record of this presence of the saint in the biography of an Egyptian theologian and jurist, Fakhr ad-din al-Fârisî. In those years he was very elderly, but also was renowned as the "spiritual director and counselor of al-Kamil." In his biography is a record of the conversation that the wise man is said to have had with a Christian monk in the presence of the sovereign. The circumstances were such that they could undoubtedly refer only to Francis. Jacques portrays him as passing through the lines apparently during hostilities rather than during a truce, as some have supposed. Jacques wrote, after all, that Francis "was not afraid to pass over to the enemy's army." In any event, Malek al-Kamil did him no harm. As was evident in his relations with Frederick II of Swabia, he had an open mind that was attentive to matters of the spirit. He was an enemy of Christians on a political level more than on a cultural or religious level. Subsequent proof of this was his respect for the truce of over ten years that he established with the Swabian emperor. It was never shaken by any serious incidents.

Jacques' testimony is important not just for the information it provides us on Francis in Egypt. For one thing, it confirms the charm that he exerted over anyone he met, even strangers like the bishop's companions. For another thing, Jacques' account also highlights the attractiveness

of the order itself. It drew people because of its goals of penitential preaching, of work among the masses, and of reaching out to the faithful. It held a fascination not just for poor pilgrims or little old women, but for mature and responsible persons. Many, in becoming Friars Minor, abandoned desirable if not exceptional dignities and positions. This—allow us to point out and insist on again—was what vexed Jacques de Vitry. In reality, he had not grasped and never would basically grasp the profound newness of the Franciscan Order. He was still saying that "they expressly imitate the form of the primitive Church and the life of the apostles." These last words, however, enable us to see that he noticed in the friars something beyond the traditional monastic formulations. Yet he does not get beyond the notion of the imitation of the life of the apostles. He remains a prisoner of his mental categories and of the theological culture within which he was trained. The same comment must be made concerning his *Historia occidentalis*. There his overall judgment on the order is more positive, but his lack of understanding remains just the same.

It is difficult to say how long Francis remained in the Holy Land. The testimony of the second *Vita* by Thomas of Celano maintains that the saint had foreseen, through the divine gift of prophecy, the fall of Damietta. This leads us to conclude that he must have stayed there between the time of the siege, with its resulting conquest, and the loss of it through the counteroffensive of Malek al-Kamil. This would place his sojourn between May 9, 1218, and August 29, 1219, more than one year. This left enough time for the vicars, whom Francis had left in Assisi and in Italy, to set off a series of disorders and troubles. Francis was informed of them as soon as possible by a lay brother who persuaded him to come back with the greatest possible speed. The informant was a Friar Stephen who, breaking obedience, traveled by sea in order to bring the saint up to date on events. Francis consulted with Peter Cattani and returned with all the other confreres.

The two vicars, in fact, had given little regard to the

guidelines that Francis had set down. They held that it was necessary to stiffen them and make them more severe with respect to fasting. They sought in this way to bring the norms up to the same level as other religious orders. Their practice up until that time had been to abstain from meat on Wednesdays and Fridays and, with the saint's permission, on Mondays and Saturdays as well. However, they would eat meat on any day when it was offered to them (obviously, as alms), out of respect for the gospel precept: "Eat what they put before you." All this clearly fit perfectly within Francis' spirit and mentality. Yet it was in open contradiction with the practice in other communities where the regulations on fasting were known for their unbending rigidity and severity. Availing themselves of the chapter of September 29, 1219, the two vicars gained the support of the friars *seniores*—it is hard to tell whether this ambiguous term refers to the oldest, the most influential, or the first entrants into the order—then proposed and pushed through a whole range of norms designed to fit the Friars Minor into systems of fasting of the monastic orders. They thus broke with the deep meaning of the penitential approach desired by their master and founder. This is proof of what was pointed out earlier with regard to the contrast between Francis' spiritual flexibility, inspired by the gospel, and the pressure for norms that were juridically firm but also limiting in substance simply by being regulatory. In any case, the latter were contrary to the condition valued most by the saint, namely, that of the truly poor who did not eat according to predetermined norms but who accepted whatever they managed to find or whatever was offered to them.

Other problems of equal weight—always out of excessive zeal—were generated by other friars no less worthy of trust than the two vicars. Friar Philip Longo, who had been entrusted with the special care of the "Poor Ladies of San Damiano," did not overly concern himself with Francis' prohibition against seeking privileges for any reason from the Roman curia, a point he explicitly

reinforced in the *Testament.* Philip asked the pope for a privilege that would protect Clare and the sisters by threatening excommunication of anyone who might harass them. Other troubles stemmed from an initiative of Friar John of Capella. As did the two vicars in other matters, he thought he was best adhering to Francis' ideas by assembling a crowd of lepers, both men and women, to form a real religious order with them, with himself as the founder. For this, he requested the authorization of the Apostolic See.

All these incidents, along with others vaguely mentioned, disturbed the life of the Friars Minor. From an historical point of view they are important and meaningful because they confirm, by their very exaggerations and excesses, the true consistency and the validity of the needs that Francis saw himself as addressing with his community. At the same time these episodes make clear his gifts of balance, of concreteness, of his sense of reality. They show that he was capable of avoiding at one stroke any dangerous onesidedness and excesses of zeal that conflicted with the guiding idea of his plan. We have spoken several times earlier of his characteristics of personal attraction and charm. To these we must add the other qualities we have examined here. They were essential for one who was at the head of a community that was as lively as it was fluid and malleable, but that was also capable of offering resistance and opposition out of some unsuspected considerations.

The vicars' initiatives came up again quite soon at the beginning of 1220. Francis had hardly returned to Italy, passing—according to pious tradition—through Venice, where he is said to have stayed for a time. In the testimonies no resistance comes to the surface on the part of either the vicars or of Philip Longo or of John of Capella. Since they continued their presence in the order without any difficulty, we have to believe that a simple exchange of ideas and an explanation were enough to restore peace and serenity. Yet they also provoked a more compelling and serious step from an institutional point of

view, which showed the realism with which the saint was able to benefit from the lessons that proceeded from his experience.

We noted earlier how Francis, after the death of Cardinal John of St. Paul, reacted to the new circumstances. He requested personally but also privately of Cardinal Ugolino of Ostia that he watch over the community, which was becoming ever larger and more demanding. On occasion the cardinal could also provide them with access to the pope. Ugolino's attitude toward all the turmoil we have touched upon here is difficult to know. The sources tell us nothing about his reaction, and it is useless to speculate without some basis in fact. We can only believe, on the basis of what Francis' later reaction was, that he himself was mainly satisfied. This is the only explanation for a related incident. Shortly after his return in the spring of 1220, he took advantage of Honorius III's presence in nearby Viterbo by going to visit him. He informed the pope of the situation of his community and requested of him that he formalize in a juridical and institutional way the function that Cardinal Ugolino was already carrying out on behalf of the community as a personal work of friendly benevolence. Francis' statement to the pontiff is transmitted to us in its basic outline by Jordan of Giano, Thomas of Celano, and other sources. It is a model of common sense: the needs of an order—and one must note that this order was one that declined privileges—were such as to require continual recourse to the pope, to whom devotion and reverence had been promised by Francis and his confreres. However, the pope was often busy and concerned over many issues and problems quite a bit more serious than those that involved the Friars Minor. Therefore, they had a need for the help of someone to whom they could turn with greater facility.

When the pope asked him to specify whom he meant, Francis answered with a request for the cardinal bishop of Ostia, Ugolino. The request was promptly granted. From then on, the cardinal protector was a permanent official institution.

This request, from one angle, sought to resolve and settle the problems that had arisen from the disorder and turmoil that had developed during his absence. It was also intended to create a steady support for the life of the order, by establishing a firm bond with the Holy See. Further, it also addressed another set of problems that had been ripening in the saint's soul, touching upon the order as well as upon himself personally.

With regard to the order, he was supremely concerned with the question, already mentioned, of the rule and of his anguish in the face of a document that somehow risked blunting the spontaneous, fresh, and eager vitality of many friars. In some, it could favor the tendency to settle into a sterile compliance with norms perceived as being external. We should, then, consider with great attention a prayer that Francis sent to Caesarius of Speyer and grasp its full meaning. (We learn of it from Jordan of Giano, the best possible witness, both because he was on hand for the event, and because he was attentive to people and things with any relation to Germany.) Caesarius, who was very familiar with sacred Scripture, was responsible for enriching with evangelical passages the rule that Francis had already composed. If, as we should deduce from the meaning of Francis' discourse rather than from the letter of Jordan's text, the drafted rule was the complex of decisions made by the general chapter over a period of time, we can then understand how the inserted biblical passages amount to nearly a third of the *Regula non bullata*. They were intended to help clarify the various norms and prescriptions, to render them more stimulating and active, and to give them the potential for forward thrust that Francis desired. In this way he hoped to reconcile his requirement for a text open to more fervent life in the community, and the need for a normative text. All of them had indicated its need in one way or another, probably in the light of concerns expressed by the Apostolic See.

There was also another reason, strictly personal, that sprang from an intimate and deep uneasiness in Francis. He had renounced his dreams of glory and his ideals of

magnificence and grandeur in order to cross over to the midst of outcasts, lepers, and poor people. Instead, he found himself in a command position, as head in every meaning and extension of the term, as a personality who dealt with the powers of the earth, from cardinals to the pope. They listened to him with respect and confidence. This turned out as a contradiction of his vocation to be truly and thoroughly an outcast. He himself stated, some time after he became a simple friar again, in confiding to one of his attendants (the source of our information), "I could have become, with God's help, the most feared head of an order, had I wanted to do so." Still confiding, he added, "I do not want to be the executioner of my brothers." His disenchantment with reality could not hide from him that not all the friars were perfect, not all were docile in following his ideal, not all were passionately ready to achieve it. He thus came to the decision to renounce the juridical leadership of the order. He reserved for himself the right of being the exemplar and, when necessary, the lawgiver.

We thus find ourselves at one of the most delicate, if not the most difficult, moments in Francis' life story. It seems to involve an inner contradiction that is apparently insoluble. In renouncing the governance of the order, he entrusted it to someone else, as we shall see. Yet he did not fail to intervene and to make his point of view prevail in the most varied and complicated decisions. This involved the editing of the definitive rule that Honorius III approved and included in one of his bulls, thereby giving it official value. The situation that resulted from this train of events appeared and really was singular and even paradoxical. Yet it still conformed to Francis' spirit and mentality. This is confirmed by reliable testimonies that date from the last years of his life, from his return from Palestine up until his death.

The solution of these evident paradoxes seems to lie in the original nature of the primitive *fraternitas* that developed into an order but did not change in essence. Now, the *fraternitas* had formed not as a function or in

adherence to a norm, but by replicating an example, namely, Francis himself. When Bernard, Peter Cattani, Sylvester, and then all the others had gathered around him, they wanted to follow a man who, in his turn, patterned himself after the model of Christ and of his life among men as they were in the gospel. The idyllic scenes of the first friars at Rivo Torto or at the Portiuncula, isolated from their historical context, tend to give the impression of being edifying fables. They become something else if we consider them as they were in reality: efforts at setting an example around Francis in an atmosphere of joy and of exceptional interior liberty. Norms would not impose a way of life, but existence inspired by Christ and lived with Christ would—if it were directed toward a continuous adherence not to externals but to profound aspects of the gospel. In light of this, everything they did was transfigured, from the assignment of places with inscription of their names by Francis himself at Rivo Torto, to the intrusion of the peasant with his donkey. At length, the desire to follow a concrete and living example as far as possible had moved Clare and her companions to abandon their residence in order to close themselves off in penitential poverty within the walls of a monastery, without any other comfort besides Francis' words and exhortations.

If we review the saint's entire attitude from his conversion up until his death, we will find the call to good example with an insistence that could even be annoying, if it were not in its proper place with its proper value. In this connection it is enough to recall the episode of his meeting with Cardinal Ugolino as proof. Did he not reply to the bishop of Ostia that he wanted to go to France in order to be an example for his friars? And that he could not accept that they should have to face dangers and privation which he would seem to avoid? We can add that his insistence on example became virtually obsessive in his final years. The reason? As the community became more numerous and subdivided in its cultural and social components, the relation between the saint and his

confreres became more difficult. Francis noticed how he was obviously becoming a symbol to venerate rather than remaining a living example to imitate. The more he was exalted, so much more was he isolated.

Because of his firm wish to be an example, he had to renounce his status as chief, as the one who was officially at the head of the order in a hierarchy that could not be eliminated. The order's need for juridical systematization was inevitable. It did not follow, however, that he was renouncing his quest to be the realization of his ideal, to be its concrete incarnation, and to live it out as it had been divinely revealed to him. His interventions, then, in the life of the order and in the norms that accompanied its development did not arise from any power of a juridical kind that he arrogated to himself. Rather, they came from the need, not logical but instinctive, to correct and clarify the letter of any norm that might distort or even falsify his ideal plan of life, as envisioned at the time of his conversion.

This is a critical point in the life of Francis of Assisi: there are those who shape and live out an ideal, and there are those who follow it and relive it. The fervor of the latter, however becomes ever more exhausted, the more the one who embodied the ideal fades away in time and memory. Francis saw and anticipated this with lucid, distressing clairvoyance. He tried to block it, or at least to retard it, with all his powers, through stratagems, guidance, and example that he himself worked out. We will briefly note that he acted on two levels: that of norms, in order to render them always more unmistakable, precise, and clear; and that of example, so that the practical reality of example might match the dispositions of the rule.

We will see how this need to save his ideal had supported and remained with Francis up until his death. We will also see how he gave himself over totally to this responsibility, drawing upon all his powers. The result was a continuous and incessant tension, alternating between disappointment and hope, with the decisive and unchanging assertions of a personality that was

strong-willed even in its deepest humility. This tension was accompanied by serious health problems, unspeakable suffering, and inhumanly cruel medical treatments.

We will see that Francis returned home ill from the Holy Land and had to face difficult problems dealing with both policies and people. His martyrdom was not at the hands of the Saracens, but was one that lasted six years. He bore it without complaint, although it tormented him in both body and spirit. Meanwhile, he became surrounded by fame, notoriety and glory among people who failed to understand that it was all nothing—even less than the straw burnt in front of the pope to remind him of the vanity of the world. He, the young man with a splendid future of wealth, grandeur, and power, had found Christ crucified in the leper. In him, as in all the suffering people of the world, he had recognized the face of his brother.

2 *Francis' resignation and succession: the historical reasons*

It was September 29, 1220, and the friars were meeting in chapter. The consequences of the incidences of turmoil that had occurred during Francis' absence on his journey to the Holy Land had been dealt with. The path of the order, assured among other things by the support of the cardinal protector, seemed to have been resumed in complete serenity. Then, to the surprise of all, the saint arose. He was already in torment from the grave illnesses that would accompany him to his death. He spoke words that to many of his audience seemed incredible: "From now on I will be dead to you. Here is Friar Peter Cattani, whom you and I will all obey." All were shaken, especially when he then kneeled before his confrere and rendered him the signs of obedience and respect due to a superior. From then on, the order was governed by a vicar. Peter was able to fill the office only for a short time, since he died a few months later on March 10 in the following year.

Another source, while telling the same story in virtually the same terms, adds a further clarification: the saint's resignation from office was also a consequence of his

state of health, which would not have permitted him to keep control over a community that had grown so large. Further, he is supposed to have been led to seek the support and aid of someone else by a warning dream. A black hen had many chicks under her wings, but they had become too many for all of them to fit even under her ample wings. This feeling in Francis had, as mentioned earlier, roots that were deep, psychological, personal, and, most significantly, spiritual in nature. Francis' companions —the ones who declare themselves as having been with him—insist on this point. They were just the ones who, from that year onward, were responsible for helping him as his state of health worsened.

Humility and the desire to become a simple friar again moved Francis to renounce being the man in charge, in order to set an example for everyone. One sees this in the request he made of Peter Cattani, during or shortly after this same general chapter, that a friar be assigned to him permanently as Peter's representative, so that Francis might always feel the duty to render obedience. On this point the clarity of his thought is as absolute as it is meaningful. This is demonstrated by what he said in confidence to his companions in rendering an account of his choice of a state of absolute humility or, as we have often stated, of marginality. We consider this to be one of the essential aspects first of his "conversion," then of his entire life: "Among other graces, the Most High has given me the grace to obey a one-day-old novice, were he my guardian, as willingly as the foremost and oldest religious of the order. The subject should, in fact, see in his superior not the man but God, for love of whom he subjects himself."

These words are reported by the various sources in virtually identical form, and surely go back to Francis himself, at least in their essential points, as one of his sayings. They are also important as an explanation of the psychology and motivations of this choice that the saint made for himself, and, by force of example, for all his brethren. A confirming clarification is given by what he said on another occasion. We recall it here to explain the

cause for his renouncement of the leadership of the order. Even though his action was due in part to his state of health and to other factors, it was primarily a function of his desire to submit himself, as well as of the implicit contradiction between his chosen renunciation of all things and the position of authority that he ended up having to assume. The status of power was against his every wish and beyond any of his expectations. On this point he told his companions, "There would have been no superior in all the world who would be as feared by his subjects and by his confreres as I would have been, if God so willed it. The Most High, however, gave me this grace that I remain content with everything, as the one who is the least in the order." But we have spoken of this earlier.

The situation, then, was becoming clearer and more specific on the juridical level. One reason for this was the death of Peter Cattani and the succession of Brother Elias into the office of vicar. As it was, Elias had given good proof of his capabilities and energy in Palestine. His performance as vicar was no less accomplished, as would be seen in the chapter of May 30, 1221, the one after Francis' resignation and Peter Cattani's death. Many friars were present, including novices, to a grand total of three thousand people. Among the authorities there stood out Raniero Capocci, the cardinal deacon of St. Mary in Cosmedin [in Rome]. At that point he was at the beginning of a career and activity of exceptional importance. He was involved in political and organizational matters connected with the grand question of what would be the State of the Church. In addition, other bishops and representatives of other orders were on hand. Of special importance was the fact that Cardinal Capocci was a Cistercian, and that other Cistercians were also present in Assisi. This means that the general chapter of the Friars Minor was also aligned with the general norms for chapters that had been decided upon by the Fourth Lateran Council in 1215. The general chapters of every order were to be patterned after the Cistercian

model. Moreover, two Cistercian abbots were also supposed to be on hand. If this is correct, it then follows that an alignment occurred between the Order of Friars Minor and the older religious orders. Now the assembly of Pentecost and Michaelmas became a formal and solemn act. Even at the time of the letter of Jacques de Vitry concerning the friars, the chapter had significant value and effect as a fraternal encounter with exchanges of experiences while still being an occasion for making decisions and establishing norms.

A bishop said the Mass, a friar read the Epistle, and Francis read the Gospel. After the ceremonies, as on other occasions, it was necessary to attend to serving many people. Jordan tells us that many people from the area provided them with bread, wine, and other food. Their joy was especially great over the presence of Francis. He delivered a sermon to the friars on the theme: "Praise the Lord my God, who sustains my hands in battle." It is the beginning of Psalm 143. Within the limits normal for his era, he elaborated on it by bringing out the value of the virtues and by exhorting them to patience and to an exemplary life for all. He then addressed the people and left them also edified and moved.

Immediately thereafter, the discussion on Germany and on the organization of the friars in that country was resumed. Brother Elias took part, as did Francis, sitting at his feet, already beset by his two serious illnesses. Anytime Francis wanted to tell Elias anything, he would tug on his tunic. In the name of the master and founder, Elias, as his spokesman, recalled how it was in Germany, where the friars had gone and were badly mistreated. Therefore no one was given an obedience to go there; there was a request for volunteers. Led by a desire for martyrdom—we will not return to what has already been said about this attitude so characteristic of the mentality of that time—some ninety friars immediately came forward. Then at this point there is an interesting story of the chance circumstances by which Jordan of Giano ended up in Germany, without his having presented

himself among the ninety. According to his own sincere admission, he had no intention of seeking martyrdom. And since he had been unable to get to know any of the five friars martyred in Morocco, he wanted to be sure to know at least one of those he considered to be the future martyrs of Germany. Hence he asked one of them to tell him who he was. It was a Friar Palmerio of Monte Gargano in Apulia, and he thought that Jordan too was one of the volunteer group. When Jordan backed off and tried to remove himself from what he considered to be a difficult and perhaps fatal duty, he was unable to free himself. While he was forced to stand by, Friar Caesarius of Speyer, whom Elias had induced to enter the order in the Holy Land, was named minister for Germany. He was charged with selecting the ones to go with him from among the ninety volunteers. Jordan happened to be one of them, even though he continued to protest that he was not one of those who had offered to go. He was then led to Brother Elias, whom we can see here as exercising his full authority as vicar. Before him unfolded a scene that is worth retelling here. The story is a lively one, but it also enables us to sense the tone of the life of the Minors in the concreteness, however humanly weak, of their everyday reality.

The brothers of Jordan's Umbrian province spoke up in his behalf. They pointed out that his health was fragile and that he was supposed to go to a country with a cold climate that certainly would not be kind to him. For his part, Caesarius remained firm in his decision that he come along. Elias decided this quarrel between the future province of Germany and the Umbrian friars by turning the definitive decision over to Jordan himself, who felt great anguish and was openly afraid. He then turned for counsel to the confrere who had undergone a strange event in Hungary; he had come to know him there at the chapter. Jordan revealed to him his anxiety, perplexity, and uncertainty. His answer was to leave the decision to Brother Elias and to confide in him any worry over the matter. The vicar, in virtue of obedience and thus formally,

ordered him to leave for Germany. With him there set out—Caesarius had made good choices—among the more important ones named by Jordan: John of Piano di Carpine, the one later sent among the Mongols; Barnabas, a German who could preach in both German and Italian; Thomas of Celano, Francis' future biographer; Joseph of Treviso; Abraham, a Hungarian; Simon della Contessa from Collazzone near Todi; Conrad, a German cleric; Peter of Camerino, James and Walter (all priests); and the deacon Palmerio, who had pulled Jordan in. The distinctions made between clerics and lay brothers, Germans and Italians, are significant. In all, they totaled some thirty people.

The expedition left, as is well known, some months later, apparently just before winter, for reasons not entirely clear to us. One factor could have been Caesarius' regret of leaving the saint, indeed forever. Another was his opportunity, mentioned earlier, of enriching the rule and perfecting it with passages drawn from the gospel. Then there were complex preparations involving a relatively large number of people. It was also necessary to provide for local subdivisions within their organization, since they were being split up according to divisions within the realm of Germany. Proof of this lies in the fact that the first group was left to settle at Trent, which was at that time an episcopal principality belonging to the kingdom of Germany.

Francis then saw his order settle into this important new territory. The group had been entrusted to Caesarius as an experienced man and also to his sturdy and capable coworkers. They left with great fear and trepidation, but in a short time were able to score a success no less than the one the friars had achieved in France. Nor was it less than what they brought about in England. Without the same extensive preparations they had taken for Germany, the Minors arrived in England on September 10, 1224, as reported by Thomas of Eccleston. This group seems to have been smaller than the one sent to Germany, and seems also to have been selected with great sagacity at

the general chapter of June 2, 1224. Along with an Italian, the deacon Agnello of Pisa, an English priest was assigned by the name of Richard of Ingworth. Richard had already been in France, probably in the territory that was part of the English kingdom. From there, as we mentioned earlier, strengthened by the experience he had gained, he was directed to accompany Agnello. He must certainly have been a person skilled in organization, since he was later authorized, between 1230 and 1232, to establish the Order of Friars Minor in Ireland as well.

The order's expansion, then, was impressive. However, it could cause some worry on account of certain aspects of passionate fervor and zeal that were not always prudent. It is clear that this was noted by an experienced man like Jacques de Vitry at a moment of ill humor. But it was, after all, only a moment. In his *Historica occidentalis,* written around the time in which these events were unfolding, he admits the admiration and impression that Francis aroused in all who met him. In the context of his account of Damietta, he relates, "*Vidimus primum huius ordinis fundatorem magistrum, cui tamquam summo priori suo omnes alii obediunt*"—Francis had not yet resigned his office—"*virum simplicem et illiteratum, dilectum Deo et hominibus, fratrem Franciscum nominatum*" [We saw the founder and first master of this order, whom all the rest obey as their highest superior. He is a simple and unlettered man, beloved of God and man, Brother Francis by name.] Even the sage bishop, whose concern was anything but absurd or unfounded, points out Francis' charm and simplicity, his great teaching as a theologian and mastery of letters despite his lack of training, and still dear to God and men.

The question, then, necessarily arises: what was the secret of Francis the man, and of the success of his order? This can be explained in many respects, as we have gradually been saying, by the response that the order made to the special needs of its time. These are all set down clearly in a letter by Innocent III dated November 17, 1207, mentioned earlier in reference to St. Dominic. We can further add that the Franciscan movement responded to still other needs to which the great pontiff, sharing in the limited vision of his contemporaries, had not paid attention. The pope had called upon men of holy life who would be able to speak like learned men and to debate with heretics without fear of polemic, who would be ready and decisive, and who would have self-confident courage in their ideas. To this appeal Dominic and his preaching friars responded with the special organizational structure of their order. There was also something else: the Church at the beginning of the thirteenth century also suffered from the estrangement that had grown (as a result of the repercussions, even the more positive ones, of the reform of the Church in the eleventh century) between the ecclesiastical sphere and that of the faithful. The clergy, owing to the demands of their interior renewal and of their reorganization, had tended to close themselves off because of the duties of their religious austerity, because of the desire among monks for closure away from the world—one thinks of the Cistercian desert and of the polemic raised by Walter Map in his *Nugae curialium* [Follies of courtiers]—because of the demand for common life on the part of the canons, and because of the assertion by the bishops of their own authority and by the clerics of their own prestige. This seclusion was valid for the most austere and sincere in religious practice. Yet gradually compromises with mundane reality set in. The faithful branded these compromises as simony, concubinage, avarice and cupidity, favoritism toward their own families, with the resulting accusations of immorality, of incompetence, and sometimes of ignorance.

It did not escape the pontiffs that all these things came down to being faults of the clergy, deviations from the ideal that they should have lived and embodied by following the example of Christ. Yet the popes did not always realize what kind of trench was becoming progressively deeper, at least in wide areas of Christendom, between the ecclesiastical world and the lay world. The clergy were respected and even feared by the laity, but they were

not heeded or followed, since the people were demanding consistency between words and actions, between maxims and their application in practice. The practice was often defective. This incited more and more readiness to hear out heretics and wandering preachers—not only the ones noted earlier from the eleventh and twelfth centuries—insofar as they seemed better than the others owing to their reputation for holiness or for miracles. Some people turned even to sorcerers and witches. There was nothing to help bridge this gap or to reestablish a relation that was not merely formal between the priests, invested with supernatural power, and the faithful, who were supposed to remain passive to this power. In this discussion we have brought out some points that clarify this whole picture for us. Further insight has been gained as contemporary studies have made more thorough inquiry into the history of religion, especially of popular forms, in Europe. Our present study obviously does not consider Italy alone, even with all its unavoidable differences from region to region, but is concerned with the whole Western World and the entire Latin Church. Further evidence of the gap between the clergy and the laity is the fact that Franciscanism, which made the effort to answer these needs and in many ways succeeded, found fertile ground for its establishment everywhere. It manifested its capacity to settle into and live even in the most distant countries, accepted warmheartedly by the people. (The same favorable welcome was not necessarily extended to them by the hierarchy and the clergy in every place.) This showed that the people had been waiting for this. In the friars they found men of the Church, to be sure. But, especially in the early times, they found religious of stainless lives, with breadth of ideas, human understanding, and, above all, benevolence and loving kindness toward the poor, the abandoned, the afflicted, ranging from the sick of any sort to lepers.

We do not want to, nor can we, dwell at length on these historical details. Yet they do explain satisfactorily the reasons for the success that the friars achieved wherever

they managed to settle. This was especially the case in the cities where they set up residence in the neighborhoods of the poor and the workers, in order to work themselves and to be close to the ones who needed them most.

There is another matter: the personal charm of Francis himself. We bring it up here, prior to examining his illnesses and sufferings in his last years. These alone would be enough to explain the veneration and cult that surrounded him immediately after death, which put an end to what we have termed his long martyrdom. There still remains about him the side of the young merchant converted at Assisi, and the penitent still in his home city and later before cardinals and the pope and finally among the inhabitants of the cities and places he visited. It will be explained better later on, but the problem remains as seen by his contemporaries. In this connection we can appreciate the episode related by the *Actus b. Francisci et sociorum eius*, as well as in the better-known *Little Flowers*, with incomparable spontaneity and freshness. Francis and Masseo were walking along the road. Moved not by jealousy but surely by restless concern and by reasonable and intense curiosity, Masseo asked the saint, "Why after you? Why after you? Why is everybody running after you?" He then made his question more specific: "Why does all the world seem to be running after you, and everyone seem to want to see you, hear you, and obey you? You are not a handsome man. You do not have great learning or wisdom. You are not a nobleman. So why is all the world running after you?"

Francis' reply is, as usual, patient and understanding, and humble in his directing all the merit to divine Providence. Yet the problem shows itself to be still present and compelling. The disorders that broke out within the order, shortly after the saint had left Italy for Palestine, receded immediately upon his return without leaving traces of bad feelings or resentment. They clearly indicate, if proof is needed, the influence and effectiveness of Francis' presence and person, including his physical presence. Jordan of Giano gives us the pathetic,

suffering image of him by portraying him crouched at the feet of Brother Elias, the vicar brimming with energy. Yet Francis does not fail to tug Elias' tunic in order to make his point of view known. This shows that he realized that he was needed by his confreres, even though he was tormented by serious illnesses.

Upon reflective meditation, keeping in mind all the factors we have looked at here, Francis comes across as a fascinating individual from his encounter with the leper to his journey to Palestine. This charm shows through the convergence of two characteristics that are apparently contradictory but not exclusive of one another. On the one hand, he is firm in stating his ideal; but, on the other hand, he is flexible in adapting it to specific circumstances without ever betraying its fundamental elements. These elements added to the psychology of his character another perspective that is persuasive and not merely accessory. His desire to participate in the status of outcasts was sincere and real. His life was not lived out in the enclosure of a hermitage or within the walls of a monastery, but among the people, in the streets, in conversation among people and with people. We are no longer surprised, then, by the first shocked reaction of someone who regards Francis as simply mad, and liable to become a laughingstock and an object of mockery. But we will also understand that such a person, after scorning Francis, would then realize that the same Francis accepted the scorn not as a result of being mad or proud, but as a man completely conscious of having chosen a specific condition. This condition entailed being considered a laughingstock or an object of mockery. Francis' choice would move one first to wonder and then, with greater understanding, to admiration.

In this way, Francis was truly a victor who always accepted his victory, but not as a sign of his own merit. After all, how could an outcast believe he had any merit in a society which valued only force of arms, or the power of money, or religious authority? Rather, his victory was a sign of the mission he had to carry out in order to meet

a particular objective: to bring Christ among men. This was not the remote trinitarian Person, the God-Son, who from the Byzantine crucifixes ruled on the immobile cross with a triumphant smile. It was the other Christ, who seemed to have been forgotten by the people of Francis' time, the son of the carpenter, the one who had gone preaching from region to region. He had lived among the humble, directing his words of understanding and love to all, working miraculous signs, eventually offering himself as a victim on the cross. It was the Christ who was God-Man, presented in his humanity, drawn himself toward perfection in line with his profound instruction, "Be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect."

Francis' firm purpose was to achieve in himself this ideal goal and to show it through his own example to others in the constant presence and imitation of Christ himself. His efforts gradually led to a reproduction of Christ himself living on earth, and to the impression that he was present again among men through some singular work of wonder. Franciscan theologians later found the explanation for this by calling Francis *alter Christus* (a second Christ) and by identifying him with the angel of the sixth seal mentioned in the Apocalypse. Yet before this idea became an object of theological reflection, it was generated by the common awareness that Francis had not only walked the earth like Christ, he had also renewed Christ's presence on earth.

This explains a point that we have already brought out: the change of attitude toward Francis and his little group of eleven companions took place just about the same time as his trip to Rome. Without assigning more value to the papal approval than it had in reality, it did mean more than a mere juridical act. At Assisi, there were those who considered him to be crazy. Yet at least they followed him with attentive curiosity, even admiring him in some way. All kept their eyes upon him. The approval of Innocent III gave heart to Francis' admirers, since it ruled out madness as an explanation and approved Francis' style of penance. The rest was assured by the fact that the

saintly penitent did not fail to maintain without any change his serene and happy attitude.

We do not want to negate the importance of the factor that we have termed fundamental and essential in the life of a medieval city, namely, *fama publica*. It completed the picture. Unfortunately, at least for now, the existing studies do not allow us to follow with the desired certainty and thoroughness all the ways and means through which this fame worked. Yet it surely went a good bit farther, and with richer ramifications, than we can now mange to imagine. In the case of the reputation for holiness, it was always surrounded by a supernatural halo accompanied by signs of wonder, even when the historical reality of a given act inherently restricted any miraculous elements. Thomas of Celano indulged in this style more than others. He was skilled at presenting, thanks to his judicious use of literary devices, exceptional occurrences as being supernatural ones. (It seems banal to say it, but Francis was an exceptional person.)

Finally, one cannot forget the personal charm of Francis' words, actions, and presence. His speaking style was warm, effective, and plain. This is reflected in Jacques de Vitry's descriptive expression, *simplex et illiteratus* [simple and unlettered]. His eloquence was above all confirmed by truth in life, in real examples that were around them in plain view, not remote in time or space, or drawn out of some *tabula exemplorum* [table of examples] composed of edifying examples and episodes. A further character trait crowns his personal charm. It was becoming progressively more evident in his charisma (using the term in our current sociological meaning) which was unquestionably *sui generis* at all times. In an age of force, authority, and power, Francis showed himself to be weak, unarmed, outcast, and peaceable. The greeting that he states was divinely inspired and revealed to him was, "God give you peace." He addressed it to everyone, apparently even to Honorius III. It was not a formal expression, irrelevant to one's particular psychological mood. For him the greeting of peace was essential and all-encompassing.

In his eyes a man was not a man unless he had peace within himself, the interior peace that nothing and no one could take away. We will understand his viewpoint better if we recall the anxieties, hesitations, and grief that shook his soul until the decisive and liberating moment of his conversion, the renunciation that restored peace to him. The man had the supreme gift of instinctive sympathy. He was able to arouse this sympathy by his capacity for self-criticism even in public, where he could make himself perhaps ridiculous in declaring his fault and repentance—the *ioculator Domini* was flourishing then. His joy in singing, in which the merriness of his soul could pour forth, was also able to stir sympathy. It became deeper the closer he drew to Christ. It is worthwile to cite a text here that, already recorded in the splendid Italian prose of the *Fioretti*, is available now in the form that Francis himself had uttered it, perhaps less polished than in the *Fioretti* but with greater spiritual vigor.

> One day blessed Francis, while passing by St. Mary the Portiuncula, called Brother Leo and told him, "Brother Leo, write." He answered, "I am ready." Blessed Francis said, "Write down what true joy is. A messenger comes and tells us that all the professors in Paris have entered the order: write down, this is not true joy. And then, all the prelates beyond the Alps, the archbishops and bishops and the king of France and the king of England have done likewise: write down, this is not true joy. And then, my friars have gone among the infidels and have converted them all to the faith, and then I have such grace from God that I heal the sick and do many miracles: I tell you, true joy is not in all these things. But, then, what is true joy? I return from Perugia in the dead of night and come here. It is winter, muddy, and cold, and the dripping water freezes into icicles on the hem of my tunic, and they keep hitting my legs, drawing blood from the cuts they make. Soiled with mud in the cold and ice, I come to the door. After I knock a

long time, a brother comes and asks, 'Who is it?' I answer, 'Brother Francis.' And he says, 'Go away, it is not a decent hour for traveling. You are not coming in.' When I again insist, he answers, 'You are stupid and ignorant. Don't come to us. We have a lot of people in here who do this and that, and we have no need of you.' I still stand at the door and say, 'For the love of God, take me in tonight.' He replies, 'I will not. Go to the cross-bearers' hospital, and ask them.' I tell you, if I have had patience during all this and have not been troubled, this is true joy and true virtue and salvation for my soul."

The episode in this version is in a Latin full of Italianisms and grammatical flavor that leave it quite close to, if not identical with, what Francis actually said. The episode is unsettling, even though it rounds out the picture that we have tried to give of Francis' personality and charm. It sharpens the contrast between what is and is not true joy. The first part, on what is not true joy, sets down the spiritual limitations above all of the successes of the order and even of the supernatural gifts bestowed by God. The second part, on what indeed is true joy, presents it only as an inner conquest suffered in humility and rejection. Any seeming paradox vanishes, however, upon observing that the "not true" joys are things that give fame, glory, satisfaction, and meaning in themselves, but they do not establish a relation between the soul and God. Nor do they help to mortify pride and arrogance. True joy—implied from his motive and from the crucial moment of his conversion—consists in accepting a place on the margin of society. This applied even in case his confreres, not recognizing or not wishing to recognize their founder and master, should send him off to a hospice that collected those who had no other place to go. These last words show that Francis knew well the required cost and suffering if true joy, true victory, and the soul's salvation lie in bearing all these things with perfect serenity. Without saying as much, he faces Christ and knows

that he is close to him in this way.

Francis' charm, then, had its roots in human richness and intensity that were truly extraordinary. They enabled him to understand and accept all things with the force of love. This is what always succeeded in reaching and moving others in their hearts.

These disconcerting qualities did not fail to create problems: this episode on perfect joy, his capacity to accept and bear pain to an exceptional degree, and his patient resignation to his illnesses have challenged psychiatrists and physicians. At the beginning of our century, there were some, like Cesare Lombroso, who, convinced of the connection between genius and madness, categorized Francis as having a sadomasochistic temperament. We are ruling out—let us state it without hesitation—the followers of Freud. This writer has the greatest respect for the great Viennese master, as for one who discovered and explored unknown continents. Precisely because of this respect, the writer holds that psychoanalysis would be ill served by adapting and applying it to Francis. To reach into the subconscious and unconscious of a man who lived eight centuries ago is difficult if not impossible. It would be necessary, moreover, to have access to direct and explicit personal elements that have not been filtered, revised, and retouched by secretaries and collaborators, as was normal in the Middle Ages. We saw an example of this in the passage on perfect joy dictated to Brother Leo.

As far as fanaticism or masochism are concerned, let us observe that the mere mention of it is a sign of not understanding Francis' ideal, as we have seen it displayed so far. His ideal was not the product of an unbalanced mind, but stemmed from careful and specific analysis of his historical reality. Francis did not go among outcasts, lepers, and derelicts because he enjoyed it. He brought along all the human baggage of repulsion and disgust. Yet he overcame these feelings on a higher human plane and on a Christian level that was closer to Christ.

3 *Pain and courage*

Francis exuded extraordinary charm and was deeply involved in his role as a strict guide of the order's life, including by example. One example among many that we can record here was told by one of those who bore the consequences of the event. In the years between 1219 and 1221, perhaps immediately after his return from the Holy Land, his work of preaching brought Francis from Verona to Bologna. Upon arriving there, he was amazed and upset to learn that a house had been built there for the friars. This in itself should have been no surprise. The great university city had experienced the dynamic work of St. Dominic, who had spent some time there during his last years. He eventually died and was buried there. The new orders, then, were regarded sympathetically in Bologna. It was natural that the commune or a group of citizens should have thought to construct a residence for the friars. There must have been a fair number of them at hand around that time. However, Francis was strongly displeased by it. He had always maintained that the friars should live as far as possible on the edge of town in huts, and that in no case could they be owners of a house. He did not enter the city but issued the order that the friars immediately leave the house. It made no difference to him that one of them was lying sick. Even that one had to go, and he is the one who recounted the episode years later, in the first person, not without a trace of resentment. Cardinal Ugolino happened to be in the area at that time, and already held the office of protector of the order. In that year he was also the legate *a latere* of Honorius III, traveling around central and northern Italy on a quest to make sure that the various communes would insert into their statutes the laws that Frederick II had issued at the time of his coronation in 1220. They dealt especially with placing heretics under ban and with respect for the liberty of the Church. Among other things, they also contained measures for the "humanization" of war, especially as it affected civilians.

With his action, Francis intended to affirm the proper

state of a Friar Minor as one who was a traveler and pilgrim everywhere, resisting every attempt to confine the order within customary juridical norms. Ugolino then sought to provide a compromise solution that would safeguard the requirements for poverty, since Francis was extremely sensitive on this point. At the same time he was trying not to deprive the friars of a shelter that they obviously needed badly. Therefore, he publicly declared in a sermon that the house was his property and that the friars were, so to speak, his guests. It seemed that this settlement satisfied Francis. In a similar circumstance (the date of which is unknown), Francis had ordered the destruction of a house at Assisi that the commune had begun to build for him in the area of the Portiuncula. He, of course, wanted the Portiuncula to be exemplary for all his friars. In no way could he permit a house to be constructed expressly for them and handed over to them as their property.

Francis had returned truly ill from the Holy Land. The state of his health had, along with the other factors, contributed to his decision to resign from the responsibility of directing and presiding over his community. What indeed were his illnesses? Diagnostic methods of the thirteenth century were very different and remote from those now current. Their usefulness was mainly to report symptoms rather than to provide a true identification of an illness. There were two serious diseases affecting him, and his body was sickly to begin with, according to the consistent testimony of all the sources. His illnesses of youth (perhaps two of them?), spoken of by Thomas of Celano, also underline this sickliness: one had stopped him at Spoleto, and the other had halted his journey to Morocco and had forced him to return to Italy. His body had also, without doubt, been weakened by his strict asceticism. In his desire to serve as a model, he mortified his body with fasting. Characteristic of this attitude is one remark of his that his companions passed down to us. It probably occurred in the period after his journey to the Holy Land, although it may possibly have taken place

earlier. He is reported as saying, "Do my brethren perhaps not realize that my body as well has need of a *pietanza*?" (In the idiom of that time, this was a second plate with more nourishment and larger portions.) "Yet since it is necessary for me to be a model and example for my brothers, I want to eat and content myself with humble food that I have not sought after."

What were, then, the diseases he contracted in Palestine? They were basically two, even though their identification in specialists' terms are debated among medical professionals. The first and more serious was malaria, which apparently was the one that led to his death. It was the quartan variety and caused serious repercussions for his liver as well. The medicine of that age could do nothing about it with its recurrent fever. This made it an uninterrupted torment for Francis, partly because of the limits it placed upon his movements and travel. He was made to suffer even more by the disease in his eyes. He had caught it from mingling with pilgrims in hospices during his trip to the Holy Land. It seems to have been trachomatous conjunctivitis, serious in itself since it causes a permanent and progressive diminution of eyesight almost to the point of blindness. It was made very painful by the treatments in use at the beginning of the thirteenth century. Since the ailment manifested itself by a flow of water and pus from the eyes, it was considered necessary to dry out at its source the cause of these liquids. According to the medical arts of that time, this source was located right on the sides of the eyes. Recourse was made, then, to cauterization, by applying a red-hot iron a couple of inches long onto the area between the ear and the eye. All this was done, needless to say, without the use of even the least bit of anesthesia, since there was none available.

Both the vicar general, Brother Elias, and Cardinal Ugolino were greatly worried over these illnesses, each in proportion to his own temperament. The former suggested recourse to doctors and to treatments. The latter saw to it that Francis actually followed the doctor's prescriptions and orders. He knew well how little care

Francis would take of himself, and how he would interpret these ills, in the light of his spirituality, as a severe test to be accepted with humble resignation. And the test was indeed severe, not so much perhaps by reason of the diseases themselves, as of the treatments employed by doctors. As part of the effort to better the condition of his eyes, he betook himself to Rieti where he stayed for some time. By this time he was forced to wear a bandage that covered his eyes. The companions who assisted him told of a series of incidents about him, and because of the story they tell, they cannot be omitted. They go beyond their meaning as disparate incidents and help to clarify essential aspects of Francis' biography and of his conduct.

Rieti, like other minor cities, had no center of study that would compare with the great medical universities at Salerno or Montpellier. It was, however, renowned for its treatment of eyes, so much so that many people, whether rich or poor, went there with the hope of a cure or at least of relief. However, it must be noted that the work at Rieti was not, as one would say now, scientific and theoretical. Rather it claimed actual experience of cures both medical and surgical, and, in some cases, they were effective. Unfortunately, they were not effective for Francis.

After examining him, his doctor decided to cauterize right away. In his judgment, this was necessary for the one eye that seemed more diseased than the other. The saint wanted to wait for Brother Elias who, however, had not yet decided to come owing to his many duties. Finally, Francis chose not to delay any longer, since his pain was very great. He was not able to sleep the night before the operation, to the point that he felt it necessary to excuse himself before the friars who were looking after him. They have preserved for us his words of affection and thanks. At length, it came time for the operation, retold in the first person by those who were with him:

"It happened that the physician came one day, bringing along the iron that he used for the cauterization in treatment of the eye illness. He lit a fire in order to heat the

iron and, when the fire caught, he put the iron into it. Blessed Francis [the companions wrote this after his canonization], in order to encourage his spirit not to be fearful, spoke to the fire: 'My Brother Fire, noble and useful among the other creatures God has created, be courtly with me in this hour, since I have loved you for some time and will still love you for the love of the God who created you. I also beseech our Creator, who created you, that you might temper your heat, so that I might bear it.' Concluding his prayer, he signed the fire with the sign of the cross.

"We who were with him all fled out of pity and compassion for him. Only the physician remained with him. After the cauterization was complete, we went back to him. He said to us, 'Pusillanimous ones of little faith, why did you flee? In truth, I tell you that I felt no pain and did not feel the heat of the fire. In fact, if it is not well cauterized, then cauterize it better.'

"The physician marveled greatly at this and looked upon it as a great miracle, since Francis had not gone to pieces. The physician said, 'My brothers, I tell you, I would have feared that not only he, weak and infirm, but also anyone who was strong and of sound body, would not have been able to bear a cauterization of this kind. I have already seen it happen with more than one patient.' Indeed, the cauterization began near the ear and continued over to the eyebrow, since there was a large flow that had been draining from his eyes day and night for several years. It was necessary, then, in the opinion of this physician, to lance all the veins between the ear and the eyebrow. However, the opinion of the other physicians was just the opposite. As it was, nothing of the kind helped him. In the same way, another physician pierced both his ears, which also did nothing to improve his condition."

The powerful and impressive example of this episode is found in the characters of the event: Francis, the fire, the physician, and the group of companions. The physician, through his professional manner and experience, makes a purely technical judgment that increases

the dramatic impact of the event. Francis' discourse to the fire also merits close attention as a prayer that exalts fire as a creature of God. Within this discourse is his request that the fire be courtly (*curialis*) since he had always loved it. This utterance is like an initial lyrical vibration of what later emerged as his "Canticle of the Sun." For their part, his companions record with emphasis that, both before and after, Francis had held fire in singular and almost childlike respect. He addresses it at first as a partner in conversation, and later regards it as a living personality in the concerned stoicism with which he faces the cauterization. It is a case in which the discipline of the spirit succeeds in dominating the violent force of material elements. The companions react by fleeing, unable to bear the sight of the hideous suffering of their founder and teacher. He himself, in serene tranquillity, manages a sad but ironic smile, when he declares himself ready for another cauterization if the first one has not turned out well.

The result was that the illnesses were able to make Francis suffer and die, but they did not succeed in defeating him. His prayer with the fire was a prayer to the Creator of the universe, that he might not fail to measure up to the severe test that was being asked of him. The fearsome fire, even though it caused pain, was still a divine creation; thus, a brother and a benefit. Francis overcame to the point that the physician could not clinically explain his great tolerance of pain. Thomas of Celano, in reworking the text of the companions, manages to present it as tantamount to a miracle. In reality, it was simply Francis' power to accept the pain as something willed by God in the human condition he had chosen. At an earlier time, the lepers were the sick ones; now it was his turn.

Cardinal Ugolino, the vicar Elias, and the brethren all were concerned for him, yet he did not turn out to be a self-centered patient in the face of whose suffering the rest of the world disappears. On the contrary, he kept alive his own sense of pity and compassion for others. This is illustrated by two episodes again connected with

Rieti and his stay in that city—one or two times?—for treatment of his eyes.

A physician—we do not know if it was the same one who performed the cauterization—in conversing with his patient told Francis that a woman had come who was so poor that, not only did he have to treat her without payment, but he even had to give her something to sustain her until his treatment was complete. Francis said nothing but immediately set in motion one of his ingenuous artifices that he would employ whenever he wanted to obtain some result without commanding it. He called the guardian whom the vicar general had assigned to him, and said, "Brother, we have to give back something that does not belong to us." When the guardian expressed amazement, Francis declared that he should give back the cloak borrowed from a poor woman suffering from an eye ailment. The guardian replied that he would do whatever Francis thought best. Francis then called a friend whom he trusted greatly and who himself was a kind soul. He told him to take the cloak and twelve loaves of bread (how he acquired these is not stated). He was to bring them to the woman identified by the physician, give them all to her and tell her, "A poor man, to whom you lent this cloak, is returning it to you. He thanks you for lending it to him. Take what is yours."

The friend obeyed and carried out the instructions he had received. At this point the incident became typical of an epoch and a mentality. The woman thought that a joke was being played on her and told him to leave her in peace. He did what she asked, but also left the cloak and loaves with her. The sick pauper realized then that it was not a trick, took it all, got up and returned home that night. Francis asked the guardian, this time with no dissimulation, to give her something to eat were she ever to return there for treatment.

We took note of the self-absorption of the sick and of Francis' spirit of charity. It seems that his companions were adverting to this in their account when, following the story about the sick woman, they felt it necessary to

declare, "For this reason we, who were with Blessed Francis, give witness about him. In whatever condition of health, his charity and kindness toward others was great, whether toward his brethren, or toward the poor, both healthy and sick, as well. He would even pass on to them, with great inner and outward joy, the things necessary for his own body that the brothers at times bought for him with great care and devotion. He would deprive his body of these things, including things that were essential for him, after having urged us not to bother ourselves over him."

Another typical episode drawn from his stay at Rieti is transmitted to us again by the companions who assisted him in the last years of his life. They attribute it to the gift of prophecy that, in their judgment, the saint possessed. In moving from one residence to another in Rieti, while still under treatment for his eyes, he became the guest of a poor priest who was in charge of a small church, not far from town, called St. Fabian's. Today it is known as the Church of the Forest, or St. Fabian of the Forest. At that same time Pope Honorius III was in the city with his court. This was between June 25, 1225, and January 31, 1226, already near the end of Francis' life. Many curial officials went to see Francis, since by this time he was a known personality who attracted people either through devotion or through curiosity. In coming and going, the ecclesiastics paid scant attention to the damage done by the traffic of so many visitors to the little vineyard of the poor priest. Francis consoled his host with telling words: "Don't worry and don't be angry, since we cannot do otherwise." He then exhorted him to have faith in God, who would help him through his poor servant Francis. He added, "Don't grieve any more, nor say harsh things to anyone [evidently the priest was vehemently irritated by someone], and don't complain about others. Have faith in God and in my words: if your yield is less than twenty loads of wine, I will make up the difference to you." He had no need to do this, since the priest's harvest was more abundant than usual,

yielding him the twenty loads of wine that Francis had predicted.

For his companions, it was important to emphasize here his spirit of prophecy. However, the whole setting of this tale sheds light on his state of mind as alternating between annoyance and resignation in his acceptance of respect and reverence from the curial officials. If they turned out to have done harm to a poor priest and to have risked ruining his meager possibilities of subsistence and income, he held them to be vain and even essentially reprehensible. Between the prelates who came to revere him and the poor priest, he did not hesitate; he could not fail to take the part of those whom he had chosen one day in his youth, when the definitive decision of his life matured out of his pity for a leper.

We have dealt upon Francis' situation, difficulties, and suffering from his illnesses, not for the purpose of merely providing anecdotes and illustrations. All too often, from the most ancient times, they have been used in place of real events. Instead of such anecdotes, as beautiful and precious as they may be, we need the harder but more effective reality of the man who heroically furthered his ideal without letting himself be bowed. He could be swayed neither by men nor by his own body, which he was wont to call "Brother Ass," or the "cell" that enclosed his soul. Against this background of pain stands all his organizing activity for the order. He had indeed entrusted this task to Brother Elias as vicar, but he also followed it with all the attention and sense of responsibility that was even more acute and present for him. He felt himself involved in it insofar as his image was more and more evident in the life of the Church. Because so many people heeded him,he recognized the need to speak clearly, to admonish, and to affirm his ideal everytime and everywhere possible.

He would not, however, have been Francis of Assisi if, amidst all his terrible pain and his concerns and responsibilities, he had forgotten his "brothers," the friars, and his "sisters," especially the ones who had followed him

during the hard times of doubts, of choices, and of accomplishment. The notes and the blessing for Leo, as well as the letter to Clare, are but surviving fragments that still give witness to a love and a remembrance that no physical pain nor any human worry could cause him to neglect.

IX

The Rule and the Rules

1 The order and its institutional norms

Among the worries that deeply troubled Francis during the last years of his life was the problem of the rule. It entailed serious questions on several levels, starting with personal psychological ones for himself. There were also organizational questions for the order and for the acceptance of the various resolutions, made by chapters, on the part of the brothers. In addition, there were also ecclesiastical concerns in the sense that any finalized resolution was to be discussed with the cardinal protector and within the curia prior to being approved by the pope. One definite spur toward a full and total preparation of a rule was the unsolicited intervention of Pope Honorius III. On September 22, 1220, he issued regulations affecting their acceptance of novices in his bull *Cum secundum.* It became necessary, then, to deal with the matter in a decisive manner. This was all the more true since it was no longer possible to continue along the path of expedients, such as having asked Caesarius of Speyer to compile a series of gospel passages relative to their existing plan of life. Moreover, the growth of the friars and the increase in the number of their residences demanded a text that was as systematized and permanent as possible. No longer could the rule be subject to a

continual process of revision and rewriting, similar to what the *Legend of the Three Companions* describes as several rules that were gradually tried out and adapted. Francis, then, had to accept a rule because of the pressure of circumstances, just as he had had to accept that the tiny original *fraternitas* of Assisi had become an order. The order was spreading throughout the whole West, and its great success was itself becoming a source of concern.

A further point to consider is that the rule that was presented to Innocent III had, through his approval, allowed the community to declare itself and to carry out its early activity. However, this did not mean that that rule was capable of governing and guiding a vast, developed order that by then was multi national. It was necessary to think of a new, organic compilation of norms that would address the most varied and developed needs brought on by the expansion of the community of brethren.

These problems troubled Francis in his quest for and creation of a text suited as much as possible to the realization of his ideal. In a similar way the question of the various rules of the Franciscan Order troubles historians and philologists no less than the "Franciscan question." Both entail consequences of importance insofar as they consider the interpretation of the Franciscan ideal, the number of people in drafting the texts that have come down to us, and then the mutual comparison among the texts themselves. The only advantage that the question of the rule has over the question of the Franciscan sources is that the former is documented by at least two sure texts with fragments of others. The latter question is always in search of the source of the sources. Its first difficulty is how to know if it can ever be found, or if it even ever existed.

The long and lively discussions on the rules, however, have yielded some firm points which merit our attention at least briefly in order to review here and there some aspects already discussed. The first point, so obvious as to

seem banal, is that the text presented to Innocent III no longer exists. Any attempt to reconstruct it in any way, as has been tried, is destined to fail, since the only information we have on it is what Francis himself has stated: it was quite brief and composed of gospel passages. Confirmation of this is provided for us in the rule given to St. Clare. It was more the statement of a purpose than a series of norms. It was a set of passages exhorting to deeds in imitation of the gospel, the same kind as those which make up the first chapter of the *Regula non bullata* that has come down to us. In reality, there is no going beyond hypotheses, which at any rate would be useless to us in this part of our study. The need for a new rule became obvious when the one presented to Innocent, whichever it was, no longer served any purpose.

Two texts have come down to us, quite different in their structures and lines of development, in the guise of rules: one *sine bulla* or *non bullata,* the other *cum bulla* or *bullata.* The first one is characteristic of the saint. It consists of twenty-four chapters in a format that is more discursive than normative. Its tone varies between counsel and command. At first sight it comes across as a text that was the product of long labor of preparation and composition, even though someone later intervened to provide the finishing touches. The fact that it did not gain papal approval, even though it had been drawn up for that purpose, can mean that the ones who produced it were not satisfied. It can also mean that the cardinal protector and the curia had wanted something more clearly and more rigorously normative. In any case the fact remains that this document had specific importance, since reference is made to it by commentators on the definitive rule such as Hugh of Digne or Angelo Clareno. Moreover, it is often referred to as well in the biographical/hagiographical sources on Francis, ranging from Thomas of Celano to the *Legend of the Three Companions.* The impression is created that some of its incisive, unmistakable, and firm phrases could have been dictated by Francis himself or are at least a precise expression of his personal

conviction and spirituality. It suffices to read the introduction to chapter XXIII, which comes as an appendix after the preceding chapter concludes with a prayer to God. Its beginning words, *"Omnipotens, sanctissime, altissime et summe Deus . . . propter temetipsum gratias agimus tibi . . ."* [Almighty, most holy, most high God . . . for your own sake we give you thanks . . .] resound in the ear like the opening of the "Canticle of the Sun": "Most high, almighty, good Lord God," which leads into a hymn of thanksgiving that has several places similar to ones in the texts of the rules.

The composite text of the rule could not help but attract the interest of philologists. They have been concerned with attempts to uncover its process of formation. This was to help them, in some way, to collect the traces of Francis' positions and the repercussion of events within the Church. The process was still open to every influence and was subject to assimilation of those positions and changes that became needed from time to time. This task, varied and complicated, is still going on. It seeks to reconstruct the genesis of a complex of norms. Their particular origin requires investigation and research that, as has been correctly pointed out, cannot be completed by notes of pure and simple impressions.

One line of thought is advanced by one of the most recent scholars on this *Regula non bullata,* who limits his work to the field of philology more than of history. According to him, it is possible to establish, with great probability, that the first part of this rule, up to chapter XVII, seems to go back to an earlier version of 1215. That was the year of the Fourth Lateran Council, which reaffirmed the need for the new orders to become part of one of the four approved "religions." The next part of the rule, up to chapter XXIII, the singular characteristics of which we have already examined, would be a prayer composed by Francis, and an adjunct to the rule. Nor is the opinion of Grundmann to be undervalued. He considers at least a part of this rule to be a more-or-less successful attempt to give the Minors some juridical consistency that would

permit them to escape the eventual danger of suppression as a consequence of the council's decisions.

Out of the welter of contrasting opinions, what seems unquestionable is the composite character of the rule and the possibility of connecting some of its norms with specific moments in the order's history. For example, chapter XV, *"Quomodo fratres debeant ire per mundum"* [How the friars are to travel], has general orientation and directives that repeat in full the instructions of Jesus Christ to the apostles. It precedes chapter XVI, *"De euntibus inter saracenos et alios infideles"* [Missionaries among the Saracens and other unbelievers] which reflects the experience of the martyrs of Morocco and, apparently, Francis' preaching in the Holy Land, where he spoke of the two ways in which they could be missionaries: "The one way is that they not get into fights or quarrels, but that they be subject to every creature for the love of God, and that they declare themselves to be Christians. The other way is that, once they have observed that this is pleasing to the Lord, they announce the Word of God that others might be baptized and become Christians. . . ."

Something that does not seem to have been brought out yet is contained in chapter VII, *"De modo serviendi et laborandi"* [Work and the service of others]. Without doubt, a stage in the evolution of the order is reflected there, in which its image is not yet fixed with regard to their function within society. Some indications tend to show that there was a kind of fluidity of attitudes and, in all probability, of comportment among the friars. Indeed, let us consider this admonition: "Let none of the brethren, when they are among others to serve or to work, be chamberlains [suited to the *camera*, i.e., to financial administration] or chancellors. Let them also not have any positions of command in the houses where they serve, nor accept any task that might cause scandal or harm their souls. But let them be inferior and subordinate with respect to everyone in the same house." Norms of this type had a reason for being as long as the order was an Italian phenomenon. It was common usage in the

Italian communes to employ religious in financial offices, such as the *camera*, and also in other offices where education and writing skills were required, as in the chanceries. In imposing these prohibitions, Francis was no doubt thinking about the *Umiliati*, whose members were intensely busy as chamberlains and chancellors. They—some more than others, surely—had to handle a lot of money. This was enough to worry the saint since he had a genuine physical revulsion for coins. Moreover, these were positions in which the friars eventually came to be called upon for controlling, overseeing, and presiding. They were thus falling short of the demands for humility and for service to all, as stressed continually and insistently in the rule.

This chapter VII is on work, and its central part, woven altogether from gospel passages, shows the handiwork of Caesarius of Speyer, whom we spoke of above. It also allows us to determine that a clear image of the order emerges from the *Regula non bullata*. It is that of a community of laborers, preferably manual laborers. Yet it specifies that they certainly may be compensated, but never with money; only in case of necessity can they go around asking for alms. The characteristic desire to be placed in a condition of uncertainty and risk is evident: it was already the condition of the greater part of the townDwellers and also of laborers. The implicit motive in the authorization of begging is also evident. Since one who was without work and was in a state of need had the right to seek charity from others by begging, this right was granted to the Minors as well. The only more rigorous and more penitential twist is seen in the absolute prohibition against accepting money. It is affirmed in chapter VII and repeated in chapter IX. In the latter, the scarcity of gospel references in two-thirds of the chapter allows us to grasp the spirit and soul of Francis, as long as the wrong impression is not gained from the chapter's title, *"De petenda elemosyna"* [Begging alms], and attention is given to its real content. It clearly expresses the demand of placing oneself among outcasts, as mentioned earlier

in relation to the deep and decisive inspiration that moved Francis at the time of his conversion, as a final and conclusive choice. "Let all the brothers"—one can discern the psychological progression in moving from exhortation during the first period over to command during the second—"strive to follow the humility and poverty of our Lord Jesus Christ. And let them remember that we need nothing else from all the world except, as the Apostle says, something to feed us and to cover us. With these things we are content. And they should rejoice when they find themselves mingling with vile and despised people, with the poor, the weak, and the infirm, and with those who beg on the edges of roads. When necessary, let them go out for alms. Let them not be ashamed, and let them remember further that our Lord Jesus Christ, true son of God, all-powerful, set his face as hard as rock and was not ashamed while he was poor and a pilgrim and lived from alms along with the Blessed Virgin and his disciples. And when people humiliate them and refuse to give them alms, let them thank God for that, for they will be honored for these humiliations before the tribunal of our Lord Jesus Christ. Let them know that the humiliation is imputed as a fault not to the one who receives it, but to the one who causes it. The alms is the inheritance and justice that is owed to the poor, which our Lord Jesus Christ acquired for us. The brothers who suffer in procuring it will have a great reward and will cause those who give to win and acquire this reward as well, since all the things that people leave in the world will be lost, but they will have a reward from the Lord for all the charity and alms they have given."

Other aspects of the rule—and here is not the place to explore philological questions—tie in with precise and decided ideas of Francis: brotherly love, preaching by example (*omnes fratres operibus praedicent,* as stated in chapter XVII), respect for priests, bishops, and ecclesiastical authorities in general, rigorous orthodoxy, and the penalty of expulsion from the order, as provided for friars who sin through incontinence. An entire chapter, number XX, is then dedicated to the veneration and the limitless

respect that the friars ought to have for the sacrament of the Eucharist.

The concluding part, chapters XXII and XXIII, laced with gospel quotations, displays and confirms the educated presence of Caesarius of Speyer. This is especially so where the passages follow one another without interruption, with only an occasional word as a connective. One gets the impression that this last part is intended to resume and corroborate the first chapter which was isolated owing to the need to handle immediately the conditions for the acceptance of novices. This, we recall, was the problem that vexed Jacques de Vitry.

This *Regula non bullata,* then, mirrors the life of the order around 1221, to take the usual approximate date. It seems to result from the bloc of texts that offer some detail of a chronological nature. This date, needless to say, is the *terminus ad quem,* whereas it is impossible to fix an initial date, since some part of this rule could have dated, with modifications and additions, from the one presented between 1209 and 1210 to Innocent III. Even though all the considerations of a philological and historical sort that have been made so far are indeed important, the most important one still remains that of this earlier rule's relation with the *Regula bullata.* The latter is securely dated because it is attached to the bull *Solet annuere* of Honorius III, dated November 29, 1223. The bull contains the pope's approval of the rule.

We have already brought out the reasons why the *Regula non bullata* never became a definitive rule. More than a rule with a definite normative cast, it manifests its composite nature. It is possible that it well matched Francis' mentality as an instrument that would give to the friars not a series of duties to fulfill, but rather a charge and a stimulus to action. The ample adjunct of passages from the New Testament, provided by Caesarius of Speyer, served well toward this end. Still, in no way could it have been accepted by men in the curia. The pope himself and the cardinals had been trained, in some cases to a high level, in a theological and juridical line. Clearly,

they must have been shaken at least in part by such a text. It was undoubtedly appreciable and valid as the statement of a holy soul. However, it was juridically weak. The confusion between its normative and explanatory parts would immediately have allowed for the distinction that had already, on other levels, created the contrast between counsel and precept. This had befallen the word of Jesus Christ, and certainly Francis of Assisi could not avoid the same result.

From a comparison of the two rules, however, we can tell that both had the same point of departure and made use of the same base, but only the *Regula bullata* received the definitive mark of the pope's approval. Still, we do not ignore the fact that some scholars such as Paul Sabatier have sought to deduce from a comparison of the rules the pressure on Francis and the distortion of his ideal that the curia supposedly imposed by coercion through the mediation of Cardinal Ugolino. It is obvious that Ugolino could have intervened in some circumstances with his counsel and experience as a jurist and as an expert in the life of the curia. We need only think of his function as protector of the order, which was already explicitly recognized and made official by the pope. After all that has been said until now, however, on the saint's personality and on his inflexible firmness in defending his ideal, it is unimaginable to think of any effective coercion or pressure upon him. Without doubt, it was true that Francis was weak, weary, and above all suffering as a result of his illness, e.g., from the recurring fever of his malaria. This, however, does not mean that he was unattentive or forgetful. He was already over forty, an age that was then regarded as more advanced than it is now. Yet, it was still only a mature age, at which one could still remember the essentials of what one wanted. Proof of this on another level is given by his short works which, even though dictated—we will discuss this later—are testimonies of a mental lucidity, of a clarity of ideas, of a precision of attitudes and plans absolutely beyond question.

It does appear beyond doubt that Francis discussed this definitive rule with his friars. He wrote it, as it were, in dialogue with them, firmly maintaining the essentials and giving way, perhaps with misgivings, on lesser points. Witness of this is given by the companions who assisted him in his last years and who were present for these events. After the passage of much time they were tendering homage to the foresightedness of their father and master. They narrate, "In working on the rule, he had many things written up beforehand. He told us this personally, and besought God in continual prayer and meditation that they be of service to his order. He affirmed that this was decidedly the will of the Lord. Yet after he presented them to the friars, they saw them as burdensome and insupportable, thereby ignoring those things that would happen within the order after his death. Since he greatly feared scandal for himself and his friars, he did not want to fight it out with them. He took an indulgent approach, although not willingly, and sought pardon for it from the Lord. Yet, in order that the Lord's word not return empty to the Lord, he decided to fulfill in his own person what the Lord had put into his mouth for the benefit of the friars. He finally contented himself with this and consoled his soul thereby." From this testimony there would appear to be a conflict not between the curia and Francis, but, if anything, within the community itself. In reality, as has been correctly brought out and as we have shown above, the rule of the Minors necessarily had to lose its original Umbrian-Italian character in order to grow into a scope as general as possible on the European level. To give an example, the physical disgust for money must have been incomprehensible and seemed perhaps to be irrational in countries with an almost exclusively agrarian economy, where a barter economy went on tranquilly and money was not ordinarily and perhaps rarely seen. Analogously, the admonition to the friars not to be chamberlains or chancellors had to be beyond comprehension in countries like Germany and France where everything was normally in the hands of functionaries

of the sovereign or of the local communities, without resorting to men of the Church.

In any event, Francis showed himself to be understanding. He wanted to make clear by actions that he truly knew how to be "least and subordinate to everyone" even though he wanted to uphold anything that, after praying, he maintained had been revealed to him by God. From this work of confrontation between himself and his friars the *Regula bullata* emerged. (Among the friars, the provincials showed their importance when they spoke up for the peripheral regions, and their remoteness did not make them any less worthy of being heard.) It needs to be made clear immediately that some jurist or at least some expert on religious orders must have had a notable part in the process. The reference to parallel texts of other orders, made for the Minors' rule of 1223 by Livario Oliger, could probably be too detailed. Some of the parallels are purely casual and semantic rather than real; yet the study is persuasive as a whole. Some expert (and probably more than one) had to be there, although it is pointless to guess at names. It would come naturally to think of Peter Cattani, except that he had already died in March of 1221. Caesarius of Speyer was a biblical scholar, not a jurist. Ugolino of Ostia did not have the time or the chance during these years to follow the details of a project as debated as the drafting of a rule. However, he undoubtedly did offer his counsel and protection insofar as they could aid the presentation of the rule to the pontiff for his approval.

The text of the *Regula bullata*, even though it had the collaboration of a jurist, is still the work of Francis. This is demonstrated by his energetic presence in the first person with expressions that are characteristically his, such as: *"moneo et exhortor"* [I warn and exhort] (II, 17); *"consulo vero, moneo et exhortor"* [indeed I counsel, warn, and exhort] (III, 10); *"praecipio firmiter fratribus universis"* [I firmly command all brothers] (IV, 1); *"vos carissimos fratres meos* [you my dearest brothers] (VI, 4); *"cui dilectissimi fratres"* [to whom, dearest brothers] (VI, 6); *"moneo quoque et exhortor eosdem fratres"* [I also warn and exhort the same brothers] (IX, 3); *"unde firmiter praecipio eis"* [whence I firmly command them] (X, 3); *"moneo vero et exhortor"* [indeed I warn and exhort] (X, 7); *"praecipio firmiter fratribus universis"* [I firmly command all brethren] (XI, 1); *"per obedientiam iniungo ministris"* [in virtue of obedience I order the ministers] (XII, 3); *"quod firmiter promisimus, observemus"* [let us observe what we have firmly promised] (XII, 4). These are all expressions that show up in similar forms in other verified texts of Francis. They show up especially in the *Testament*, which needs no reaffirmation as to its authenticity and importance.

If we look at the overall form of this second rule, approved by the pope and valid even today for the Friars Minor, we can tell that the participation of the jurist, whoever he was, did not succeed in limiting the direct and personal participation of the saint. This is evident especially where the fundamental points of his ideal were in question. He had entrusted them to his order so that it might put them into practice in real life. A difference remains, even though greatly attenuated, between norm and exhortation, between decision and Francis' personal tone in determining and specifying the decision. To be sure, the set of gospel passages is greatly reduced if not eliminated even though they had confirmed and, as it were, reinforced, enriched, and enhanced the other rule "without seal." One of its typical and characteristic aspects becomes lost, namely, what has been called its openness, its point of departure, its thrust toward an even higher perfection in the following of Christ crucified. The text's spiritual tone was dropped in order to align the rule with other rules. Nevertheless, Francis often intervened in order to give it an upward lift. One particular fact stands out: the earlier rule by its very nature, unstructured and composite, had allowed Francis to make a different personal contribution that was both more direct and more authentic. He had been able to assert his ideal in strong terms. He brought out its meaning and importance with an authenticity of expression that

frankly is lacking—and perhaps should be lacking—in the definitive rule.

This seems to be the truest and most meaningful difference for Francis: the juridical and precise definition did not count at all for him as did the active and functional meaning and direction. The question as to whether this second rule is more-or-less severe than the earlier one is, as far as can be judged, one that cannot be resolved easily. One ends up comparing whether days or weeks of fasting are imposed more in one rule than in another, or whether this or that point is expressed in more rigid terms. From a working point of view, it can be acknowledged straightaway that the second rule is the more agile, the more brief, the more neatly organized and, in its outward formulations, the more functional. However, it is also the one with less interior vigor.

We stated that Francis nonetheless asserted himself with all his vivacity, indomitable despite his illnesses. Thus, in the concluding part of the second chapter, after speaking about the novices, their habits, and those of the friars, he takes a stand against any possible insinuation of vainglory. He confesses that he has been tempted to it, and admonishes and exhorts the friars "not to condemn or look down on people whom they see wearing soft or gaudy clothes and enjoying luxuries in food or drink; each one should rather condemn and despise himself." He cuts at the root of the risk of the pride of the Pharisee versus the publican, while bringing out again the motive of humiliation of self as a characteristic spiritual trait of the Friars Minor.

No less significant is the exhortation, the admonishment, and the counsel that they be examples of peace in the world. His contribution is psychologically apt and penetrating. A command would not suffice to make them peaceful and to conduct themselves as brothers, since certain feelings and attitudes originate and come from within oneself. Gentleness, peace, modesty, meekness, humility, and temperate speech all begin within oneself, and the friars were to be examples of them in their daily

lives. The tone changes, however, with unmistakable authority—*praecipio firmiter*—when the subject turns again to money. The *Regula bullata* contains the perfectly clear norm: "I strictly forbid all the friars to accept money in any form, either personally or through an intermediary." He then recommends the most exalted poverty "to *his* dearest *brothers*" in chapter VI, while in chapter IX there is precious information on the topic of their preaching. Gone is the expression, juridically meaningless, that the friars ought to preach by their works. Instead, suddenly, the transition is made to more concrete realities: "Moreover, I advise and admonish the friars that in their preaching, their words should be weighed and chaste. They should aim only at the advantage and spiritual good of their listeners, telling them briefly about vice and virtue, punishment and glory, because our Lord himself kept his words short on earth." The command of obedience is firm in chapter X, but the limitation remains that it be rendered "without commanding them anything that is against their conscience or our rule." Moreover, in the same chapter the admonishment is made again that they guard themselves "from all pride, boasting, envy, and greed." The command in chapter XI to avoid temptations with women is virtually obvious, no less than the other, in the same chapter, forbidding them to be sponsors of men or women in the world. A precise command is then directed at the ministers that they request the pope to assign a cardinal protector; in the first rule, no mention is made of this.

If we compare the contributions of Francis in the second rule with those in the first, the sense of what we have said so far comes out very clearly. In the first rule, his presence is personal, individual, and lively in its thrust and direction. This presence is no less operative in the second rule, but it is restrained by the need for a clear and precise norm that is universally valid. However, the person, the individual, and the concrete and apposite example all diminish in impact.

This, we repeat, is the real difference between them,

since the *Regula bullata* essentially replicates what is already provided in the *Regula sine bulla*. It is worthwhile, however, to point out some chapters that are eliminated in the second rule. One chapter contains the gospel passages, and we have already brought out the singular isolation in which it stood. Another deals with respect for and devotion to the Eucharist; another, on the way to seek alms, with mention made of the right to receive them. Also dropped was the chapter exhorting to orthodox Catholic faith, and the two final chapters with fervent gospel exhortations that Caesarius of Speyer compiled and that must have pleased Francis greatly.

If we were to make a judgment and an overall conclusive comparison of the things said so far, we would sum it up in one fact that, in our opinion, is fundamental and historically relevant: the original evangelical fervor of the *fraternitas* had attenuated as far as it could and only as far as the saint would allow it. The *religio*, the order that had been born, was no less severe, rigorous, and austere; but it was surely less penetrating—not formally, but in point of fact—into Christian society. We do not want to be misunderstood on this point. For Francis, for his companions, as for the many friars who had experienced the exciting phase of living practical evangelism among the faithful, one rule or another did not mean all that much as a practical matter. We know of Francis personally that he did not worry himself over the rule, except to require the greatest obedience toward it. He considered it, however, as he always had, to be a launching point, a minimum up from which they were to advance toward the heights that each one of them, according to his powers, could attain. About the other friars—we refer to what we know of his companions and of the friars closest to the founder—we can state that they felt and maintained the movement's original spirit.

As normally happens, however, with historical events that involve mass attitudes, the effects were felt slowly. The juridical character of the second rule aroused the need for interpretation and commentary. We must

immediately say, however, that Francis had specifically foreseen this. He thus declared himself in the *Testament* to be in opposition to any interpretive gloss on the rule. Using the *Testament* itself—not as a new rule, but as a testimony of life intended to enhance the rule—he also attempted to provide a specific instrument that would allow them to avoid recourse to any interpreting jurist.

At this point it can be brought out—as seen in his short works, but also in the testimony of his oft-recalled companions who were with him in his last years—that Francis accentuated and intensified his personal good example by displaying it in every way. It can be said that in all their statements the *Nos qui cum eo fuimus*—the companions who styled themselves such—return to the theme that every action of their father and master was intended to give good example in meekness, penance, humility, and resignation. Each example that they cite is normally accompanied by a phrase that indicates that there are so many episodes similar to the one recounted *quod esset longum dicere et enarrare* [that it would take a long time to tell them all]. The example provided first by Christ was then repeated, reinforced, and reintroduced by Francis into Christian life and practice by his own example. In turn, it was picked up by others, thus creating a chain of good example.

This was, unmistakably, Francis' liveliest concern in his last years, since it constituted the living completion of his legislative and normative task. A meaningful expression of this, among his writings, is the *Testament*. Yet he realized that even the *Testament* was a writing and, as such, he correctly perceived, ran the risk of being discussed and interpreted either excessively, as some did and wanted to impose their view on others, or erroneously, as still others were doing. He thought then of creating a model convent that would serve the entire order as a pattern and paragon for all the others. The Portiuncula, the first dwelling, was the place most dear to him, since it was from there that the order had spread out, ever more vital and triumphant. Not by accident, he set down a

special "testament," which was designed to govern immutably, as an appropriate pattern of living, the beloved original nucleus of his *fraternitas*. Not even this was enough for him, given the circumstances and, even more, given his exceptional and long-ranging foresight. He then moved—as we shall discuss later—to place someone alongside the rule and the *Testament*, which were written documents, thus in some way dead, and liable to an autopsy by exegetes. The man he wanted was to be his successor in carrying out the good example that he personally had given and maintained within the order. He had shown this example by his resolute and specific choice from the day on which he resigned from his office as head of the order to become a simple friar again. Only in this way could he be a good example beyond question. We will see further on that the man he envisioned for this was Bernard of Quintavalle.

In reality, Francis fully realized the dilemma he was in. It was not by his choice, but by reason of his success that the more the friars increased, the more they needed a hierarchy and a juridically governed organization. Since he was a realistic and foresighted man, he accepted the consequences of an irreversible process of transformation. He was trying to hold back—an inescapable term—the risk of that decadence that he had seen undermine even the greatest and holiest of the religious orders that had gone before him. The solution that he found and implemented, even though it was unable to halt the course of events, succeeded in overcoming their destructive power: Francis has returned with regular recurrence to work within history each time his historical example has been able to influence matters effectively.

2 *The other norms of life*

The two rules are the texts that have had the deepest effect in the Church and in the reality of the Franciscan movement. Yet they are not the only ones of normative character that express the personality and action of Francis.

Unfortunately, as we mentioned earlier, there is little

we can say about the "Poor Ladies of San Damiano" for the simple reason that nothing has come down to us beyond the brief rule from the earliest times of the community, and the fragment of the letter on fasting. It is now impossible to know what Francis specifically did for them over a period of time, or which friars were charged with supervising their life and activity. The rule that Pope Innocent IV gave to Clare in a bull dated August 9, 1253, does not enable us to uncover, if they are even there, the remote traces of Francis' influence. Explicit attention is given, however, to the fact that Clare remained firm in the determination, which she had learned from Francis, to maintain rigorously complete poverty. She had been committed to poverty anyway since the time she had left the world in her youth.

The rule addressed to the so-called penitents also does not go back to Francis, not even in its earliest version. Rather than give a genuine rule to laymen, he wanted, as he did for the friars, to lay out a direction and a life-style. On that account, the result was a text made up of admonishments and exhortations, rather than of norms and regulations. It is plain that the practice of penance, preached everywhere by Francis, should and could be extended to include lay people. This approach was integral to the purpose of the *fraternitas* right from the beginning. True, the exhortation could not be directed toward clerics (and, if ever, he did it by example rather than by word). Precisely because of this, one may infer that this practice of penance was not concretized or expressed in a rule, but rather tended to manifest itself in specific solutions for specific life problems. Only later—we note a question that deserves deeper consideration elsewhere—did the order reinforce its structures, have stable sites and its own churches. Its process of "clerical normalization" matured, and at that point groups of devout people formed around the friars. For these people it was now possible to prescribe real norms of conduct or, as they said then, a rule.

In any case, there are two texts of "legislation" that definitely do originate with Francis. It is opportune to

study them even with unavoidable brevity, insofar as they help us to understand better his life and work. One is the *Regula pro heremitoriis data* [rule for hermitages], the other is his letter to St. Anthony of Padua. The first is important in order to understand the scope and meaning of eremitism for the saint and within primitive Franciscanism. The second is basic for identifying his position on studies. On this issue we find again his characteristic attitude of a negotiated acceptance that does not compromise the original ideal of his movement.

This particular *Regula* is quite brief. However, in its distinguishing points and even in the technical details that set it apart, it confirms that Francis, at the time he composed it (sometime between 1217 and 1221) was already definitively removed from the type of religious life described by Jacques de Vitry. Apparently it should have been characterized as a mixed form of religious life. At night it was contemplative, with residence in some retreat of an eremitical type. By day there was work among other people in town. A true eremitism, in the technical sense of the term, is indeed provided in this rule, although only for a determined period. This created the need for a specific set of rules. A discussion has arisen, then, among scholars on the value and meaning to be attributed to this rule. Some, such as Sabatier, see it as a fragment of the rule for the friars. According to him, it would have been written around 1217. Others, such as Walter Goetz, regard it as a preparatory text of the rule for the friars. In this case it would be a prepared segment that went unused, but that contained something similar to what is found in the rule of St. Benedict. It would thus be useful to anyone wanting to undertake the eremitic life. Still other scholars look upon this text as a complement to the rule itself. We concur in this point of view with Esser, who rightly considers this text as being the rule, written first for the friars and for the "Poor Ladies of San Damiano," adapted for the ones—and there were quite a few—who were inclined to the experience of the eremitic life.

In a rule like this, there appears a terminology that,

making specific use of distinctive words, inspires bonds of care and affection. The rule mandates that there are to be three or four friars in each hermitage, and that they are to divide reciprocal duties among themselves. Two are to be as mothers and two or even just one as sons. The ones who act as mothers are to lead the life of Martha, and the one or two others the life of Mary. In other words, the first ones should take care of all the practical necessities ranging from obtaining food—since it was not allowed for them to buy food or carry it with them or put it away for use later on—to preparing it, and to providing for other everyday needs. The other one or two were to dedicate themselves only to prayer and meditation. The residence had to be a cloister, closed unto itself, but each friar was to have his own small cell for prayer and sleeping. Practices of prayer, including the sequences of silence and conversation, are established for this eremitical life. The two sons, as they prefer, may ask an alms of their mothers "for the love of the Lord God, like any ordinary poor people." They are not to allow any outsiders to enter the hermitage, nor may they stay inside to eat. Moreover, the friars acting as mothers ought to concern themselves with the practical needs of the ones given over to contemplation in solitude and silence. However, the mothers themselves ought to try to remain away from contact with outsiders so that no one can speak with them. The ones acting as sons are to speak only with their mothers, their minister, and their custos, when he happens to visit them. A significant point is that the sons in their turn, as spelled out by mutual agreement, should after a while take on the places of the mothers, in order that the other confreres can give themselves over to contemplation. Francis concludes by recommending that this alternating pattern be kept with zeal and care.

There is one marginal note that can be readily made on this rule and on this type of eremitism: it seems to have been dedicated and restricted to clerics alone. The prayers it imposes are the canonical hours, which were prescribed for all clerics. Yet nothing in this rule is provided for lay

brothers, who did not recite the office. Another factor to consider is that the kind of rule and the availability of hermitages seem to have allowed for only a limited number of Friars Minor to be engaged in the eremitic life. This point bears examination when we consider how often Francis himself went into a hermitage, especially during these last years of his life. He would go to Greccio, or to La Verna, which had been donated to him in 1217 by a local lord, or to Sarteano. The companions who attended him tell an interesting story that brings out Francis' refusal to brook even the appearance of property. A friar living at one hermitage foresaw that sooner or later their father and master would come to stay with them. On that account he prepared for him a little cell or, rather, a hut, made of well-cut wood neatly put together. Francis, however, found it to be too lovely and wanted it to be made of rocks and tree branches. This would make it a genuine hut like the ones that, even now in that region, shepherds build for themselves in the countryside. Francis wanted them all to be of this type, since the poorer the huts were, the more they appeared to conform to his wishes. A few days later when Francis asked a friar where he had come from, he replied that he was coming from Francis' own cell where he had just been looking for him. Francis immediately countered him by saying, "Because you said that the cell was my own, someone else will stay in there and not I." A trifling episode, apparently, but one that is meaningful and symbolic, since his companions employ it as a reason to recall his citing of a passage from the Gospel according to St. Matthew: "Foxes have holes and the birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head" (8:20). He recalled, with his characteristic literalism in following the gospel, that Jesus did not set up any cell or other dwelling for himself during his forty days and nights of solitude in the desert. Rather, he accommodated himself, according to Francis, under a rock formation.

Eremitical practice, partly because of the possibility it offered him of rigorous and austere poverty, became one

of Francis' most frequent customs. He was more and more desirous of solitude, the more that throngs and crowds were drawn to him out of curiosity or devotion. His annoyance with such crowds was acute, similar to his reaction to the prelates and men of the curia who came to visit him while he was staying with the poor parish priest of St. Fabian near Rieti.

The other friars acted similarly to those who were closer to him and who felt more deeply his influence and the power of his example, both while he was alive and after his death. Brother Giles deserves mention as one of these. No less negligible is the fact that in 1231, a few years after Francis' death, Brother Anthony of Lisbon (better known as Anthony of Padua), after preaching at Padua, retired to the lands around Tiso da Camposampiero with two companions. He observed the prescriptions of the rule for hermitages and built his "cloister" there on top of a huge walnut tree.

It must be pointed out that this eremitical tradition, since it invoked the personal example of Francis, remained as an element of the typical spirituality of the people who wanted to be closest to him. Indeed, the love for solitude was characteristic of the friars who, even many years later, aspired the most to follow the example of the founder and master. Among them is the famous example of John of Parma. After his forced resignation and the sham trial conducted against him by Bonaventure, he retired for many years at La Verna. It was only by order of the pope a short while before his life's end that he left there at all. Ubertino also lived at La Verna in the early part of the fourteenth century, and there wrote his *Arbor vitae crucifixae Jesu* [tree of the crucified life of Jesus]. By way of affirming further the value and importance of Francis' example, we note that many other contemplatives and "spirituals," even today, have followed in this path. Two examples are the hermitages of Monteluco near Spoleto, and those of La Maiella near Sulmona. This is without even counting the one in the area of Subiaco, where Angelo Clareno found asylum and went out of sight.

We do not know how long this *Regula pro heremitoriis data* was followed and respected in its simplicity, which was more apparent than real. Its full importance becomes clear, however, when we consider its value as the presence of an exemplary form of life that had been dear to Francis himself.

This *Regula* is important for Italian Franciscanism, especially for the contemplative and "spiritual" variety. Something of this rule's importance is discernible in a secondary activity that is enlightening for anyone wanting to comprehend the complex variety and multiplicity of experiences in the Franciscan movement. In this context one last text of a normative sort that can be examined is the saint's letter to St. Anthony of Padua. Its value and meaning are essential to the whole history of the order. It consists of just a few lines which are quoted here in their entirety in order to facilitate the discussion that it merits: "To Brother Anthony, my bishop, Brother Francis sends his greeting. I grant my consent for you to teach sacred theology to the friars, provided that you do not extinguish by this study the spirit of prayer and devotion contained in the rule."

Appeal is made to the *Regula*, which can mean only the *bullata*, since it is referred to as an official document, as only the rule of 1223 was. This reference allows us, as is commonly agreed, to set a *terminus a quo*, namely, the date of the bull *Solet annuere* of November 29 of that year. The *terminus ad quem* would be marked by the journey of Anthony to southern France in the second half of 1224 going into 1225. He not only preached there as a friar, moving about from one place to another. He also taught theology to his confreres. He must, then, have already received the authorization that Francis' brief letter grants him in terms that are as concise as they are rigorously and precisely formal.

This letter's exterior characteristics have raised many doubts about it, causing individual scholars to waver on it. Its expression is dry, and its briefness is lacking in any affectionate phrase or meaning, much different from

Francis' normal touches of cordiality. Yet there are too many elements that militate in favor of its authenticity whether on a philological level or, even more, on an historical level. In the first place the greeting *"Fratri Antonio, episcopo meo"* singular as it is, undoubtedly goes back to Francis. It is unmistakably confirmed in the second *Vita* by Thomas of Celano (ch. 163) where, speaking of the respect that the saint had for theologians, he goes on to note: "One time, while writing to Brother Anthony, he had the letter begin with the words, *'Fratri Antonio, episcopo meo.'* " This singular designation of Anthony as a bishop, when it is certain that he never held that dignity, could simply be a sign of respect for his excellent teaching. At that time, prior to the advent of the great masters some years later, Anthony was regarded as the order's most important theologian. The greeting could also express an attitude of humility, an admission by Francis of his own ignorance that rendered him *subditus* toward the young former canon who came from his native Portugal, humbly entered the order, and only by chance had occasion to display his high-level theological preparation. This important detail is well-documented, coming as it does from Thomas' work that was based mainly on testimonies provided to the minister general Crescentius of Jesi. He had ordered an inquiry and a collection of everything pertaining to the memory and biography of St. Francis. He thus acquired a more exact and more thorough picture of the life of the order. In his day, Francis was certainly aware of what was going on within the order and had to attend to it. The order had grown in number and was teeming with life owing to the young men streaming into it. It gave to the novices coming into it an effective spiritual preparation, but it could not in any way provide a solid cultural training. This was a specific difference between them and the Order of Preachers of St. Dominic. The difference was starting to be a serious drawback not in the eyes of the faithful nor even in those of the papal curia, but certainly in pastoral practice. The basic spirituality that Francis had stamped onto his movement, and that

upheld it thanks to his exceptional example, could also serve to fend off suspicions of heresy. Yet it was scarcely sufficient to carry them into real debating, especially in the face of the exceptional polemical ability of heretical teachers and missionaries. Awareness of this must have been the ground for Anthony's request. It could be that, upon his arrival in Italy, he had already had occasion to see for himself the difficulties that the friars had in southern France, and that he should attempt to remedy them. It is also possible that, having to return to that area again, he had thought over his chance of bringing the help of his experience and theological training to his confreres, thinking that they might have been having problems.

The dry brevity of the letter causes one to believe that it dealt with a necessary decision, but one that Francis took by force of circumstances. He wavers in a way that we have seen him do regularly, as we have already noted in regard to the rule. He hovered between condescension (using the frequently employed term *condescensio*) and clear limits cautiously applied to the concessions. This comes—unless we are engaging in an exegesis that is too subtle for such a short text—from a preciseness that is swift but reliable: "*Placet mihi quod sacram theologiam legas fratribus*" [I grant my consent for you to teach sacred theology to the friars]. "*Placet*" [lit., it pleases me] and "*legas*" [lit., that you read] are technical terms, the first applying to canon law and the second to higher education. The personal form of "*legas*" that binds Anthony to direct and specific responsibility goes further to connect with the condition for the permission. This also touches Anthony personally and binds him again in a direct way. But it does so in such a manner as to indicate, in relation to the teaching method, the religious spirit and tone that should characterize it. In other words, Francis had nothing against theology or that it be studied. Rather, by his "*placet mihi*," he authorizes a course of lectures (*legere theologiam*), yet also states that the value of prayer and asceticism ought not to be overlooked in study. Thus we

see here the problem of study, in all its relevance, for Francis and his order. Again a problem with two faces, again an antithesis to reconcile.

We spoke earlier of Francis' cultural training and indicated that its level was modest but not insignificant. It was the training for a merchant destined to work in business on an international level, as seen by his knowledge of French. This conclusion applies if, naturally, it refers to the ordinary situation of a layman. No less naturally, the conclusion changes if it refers to another scale of values. This is why Francis speaks of himself as an *idiota*, i.e., as ignorant. It is also why Jacques de Vitry, on the same basis of comparison, categorizes him as *simplex et illiteratus;* in other words, not a person of studies or of literary training.

What, then, was the personal attitude that Francis bore toward education in general and theological and ecclesiastical education in particular? On this point we do not have any direct testimonies that are relatively certain, except for this short letter to St. Anthony. Accordingly, we have to deduce this attitude from the data at our disposal. One can say that his commitment and responsibility as head of the order must have improved his knowledge probably of Latin and certainly of sacred Scripture. Yet it has also been correctly pointed out that this was a matter of practical learning based on his use and reading of liturgical texts. The saint had specific awareness of his own limits, as seen by the fact that he had recourse to Caesarius of Speyer when he wanted to furnish the *Regula non bullata* with a set of New Testament passages, along with other biblical texts, in order to express and reinforce its evangelical inspiration.

There is no question, however, that he turned down any approach toward juridical training, since he feared its ability to transform the meaning and general impact of norms and the specific values of their words. His continual admonition against seeking privileges and against glosses on the rule make evident his effort to achieve a normative situation that would make a monolithic block out of the

order, one capable of resisting the process of decay and change in all things human. His hostility to the juridical mentality and culture sprang perhaps from his activity as a young merchant. During that period he was able to see for himself the ability and facility with which notaries converted illegal business into legal, or else used clever distinctions to get around the most decided and obvious canonical prohibitions. It seems that the same concern, marked perhaps not by disgust but certainly by refusal, is manifest here as it is when Francis talks about money. He sees both of these elements as oppressive menaces and as hidden perils, against which it is hard to defend oneself, since they slip away and hide with the same cleverness with which they deceive. Toward juridical training, then, he has an ill-concealed hostility. His concern over ecclesiastical and theological training, however, springs from very different roots.

Francis, as we have pointed out several times, was sincerely orthodox. He held priests in the greatest respect since a priest consecrates the Body of the Lord. He also held theologians in such respect as teachers of the truth of faith, yet he also feared the arrogance of the learned, the vainglory that arises from the awareness of possessing something that other people do not have. He also was always wary of the taste for allegories, interpretations, and attempts at changing the genuine substance of things through clever wording. The literalism pervading his whole psychological attitude and his whole way of following the gospel developed as a deep conviction that the gospel should be taken simply and without gloss and not understood through the interpretations and allegories and accommodations presented by many clerics. There is a final point that, from his perspective, justifies his concern, namely, the divergence that he, no less than other believers, observed between what this theological culture taught and how it was actually lived out. Without pushing Francis into polemical positions that he stayed away from, it is clear that he pointed out the need to weld teaching and living together, rather than teach precepts that

would then not be put into practice.

These positions of Francis have their exact and deep coherence and logic, corresponding as they do to the results and commitments of his whole life experience. To conclude from them and affirm that Francis was an enemy of education and study constitutes a huge leap, so much so that one must ask how some historians have been able to make it. It is enlightening to observe that Francis' conversion did not spring from any cultural crisis, but from the tragic realization of an existential situation locked into an antithesis that could not be reconciled. A choice had to be made that was not theological or juridical, but personal and social. It is also true that he regarded himself and his friars as engaged not in the social uplifting of the masses, but in the need to restore to them their dignity as children of God and as beloved of Christ, who had deliberately chosen to be like them—a poor worker who ended up crucified—and not like the powerful of the earth.

Something, however, that was not in Francis' intentions made its way in nonetheless and finally took hold: it started the moment that his movement, and indeed his whole religious, ideal, and human concern—open as it was to everyone—began to accept clerics and priests. In Anthony's case, it even assimilated a true master of theology. Caesarius of Speyer, however, had commenced his studies but never finished them. In the final analysis, the saint must have recognized without difficulty that theological training was a necessity for at least some of them. For the normal situation of the friars was to work in the midst of the masses, among people of humble and wretched condition; yet they were also to be attentive to real-life problems and to the spiritual conclusions that flowed from them.

At this point the essential problem and serious difficulty emerged: how to avoid any damage to spiritual culture by theological culture. It was a real risk. At the end of the thirteenth century, Jacopone da Todi could lament, "*Mal vedemo Parisi, che àne destrutt'Asisi,*" i.e., the theology

learned at Paris had destroyed the spirit of Francis. When the question was raised by Anthony of Padua, the answer was specific, in exact terms that were beyond question: the responsibility was entrusted to Anthony himself. He should indeed teach theology—the letter's few lines state this clearly—but he should also take care to avoid suffocating the spirit of prayer and devotion, the desire and need for contact with God, and the aspiration toward piety and asceticism. It was a call with a specific cause, and yet it was also an act of trusting esteem. Francis must have known well that Anthony had confronted the same situation and had made his choice. Theologian and priest that he was, he had become a Friar Minor, obviously preferring the path of prayer and devotion. He had to teach this path, along with theology, to his listeners and brethren.

Unfortunately, since nothing remains of it, we know nothing about Anthony's teaching or about how he attempted to fuse theology with the spirit of prayer. We can, however, discern something of it in the body of his sermons that have survived. It seems possible to summarize this teaching in these terms, if we have understood it correctly: the theological method, i.e., the whole logical-dialectical apparatus and the allegorical interpretative technique remained intact in their complexity, which he as a professor thoroughly mastered. We can say, however, that he modified the content, or rather its tone, assuming that this was not simply because it comes to us contained in sermons. It must indeed be noted that these were sermons not addressed to the people; they were not of the kind intended to admonish the faithful and lead them to penance. Rather, they were doubtlessly addressed to the clergy, as can be seen from their topics. They contain powerful criticisms of the evil deeds of the clergy, energetic directions for extirpating these evils, an impassioned and fervent exhortation to a way of life in profound conformity with the teaching and example, and a call to renewal and reform that breaks with traditional patterns while still rigorously respecting them. Further, it is important to remark that sermons of this kind were, in any case, an essential and not optional component of the teaching of theology.

This direction, which lasted throughout Francis' life and beyond, was later interrupted. This fact explains the disappearance of Anthony's theological works, apart from the sermons, at least insofar as they were written. The shift occurred when professors connected with Paris, beginning with Alexander of Hales, began entering the order. It marked a decisive turn of Franciscan teaching toward Paris. Francis by this time—1232—was already dead, as was Anthony himself. Franciscanism thus inserted itself fully into the university tradition of theology.

Still, the antithesis that Francis had pointed out, and about which he warned his "bishop," was not forgotten by the Friars Minor who were teachers. Without positing a nexus that would be artificial between currents of theology and Franciscanism, we cannot fail to bring out an important factor. It was not the lesser people (against whom Jacopone da Todi argued with good reason), but the grand Franciscan masters, such as Bonaventure and Peter John Olivi, the two most important theologians of the second half of the thirteenth century, who were the most attentive to their founder and master. They knew indeed how to align theological doctrine with the spirit of piety and devotion. Brother Peter was quite correct when he stated that Francis had introduced a "*novum et tenerum spiritum pietatis*" [new and tender spirit of piety] into Christian living.

Francis concluded his institutional and normative task, by this letter to Anthony, with perfect coherence among his contributions. He directed his efforts toward assuring and guaranteeing, as far as humanly possible, the orderly and progressive development of the Order of Friars Minor. It was proper for him to hope that they would remain substantially faithful to his first ideal. At the same time he realized, with resigned indulgence, that the order would also have to adapt itself to the real conditions of the Church living in time.

Many there are who consider the saint to be a splendid example of the embodiment of dreamy idealism, yet substantially destined to perish in the encounter with implacable reality. Contrary to those, however, based upon what has been said so far, we find a man—or, considering his background, a merchant—who sought to establish a proportional relation between the original moment of his life-choice and subsequent external circumstances. He had calculated his decisive and irrevocable choice, but he had also seen that it called for sharing and was able to be shared with others. This consequence was inevitable, since the form of his choice was changeable according to the given factors at play. His brethren only had to remain firm on a few points, but these were essential and precise: passage over to the side of the unfortunate, adherence to Christ, and the religious meaning of existence with trust in God.

We must state, as we review the more than 750 years of the history of the order, that Francis won and that his ideal never went into sunset. We can state further that he perceived the proportional relation as being flexible in adapting to circumstances and yet as being firm in essential values, thanks especially to the power and dynamism of example. Proportional relation explains and clarifies the contrasts, modifications, articulations, and reforms of Franciscanism through the centuries. It also constitutes its perennial force, enlivening through its vitality.

We affirm him, then, without hesitation, as an incomparable saint. Francis of Assisi was also an exceptional organizer, not in the same sense as Ford or as other greats of capitalism and politics, but in his intuition of the relationship between the essential and the contingent, between something that is fundamentally and permanently human and something ephemeral and transitory, between metahistory and historicity.

X

Francis in His Writings

1 The Latin writings

The sufferings caused by his illnesses, notably the quartan fever and the near-blindness resulting from the trachoma in his eyes, had the consequence of limiting Francis' mobility greatly but not entirely. They did not, however, permit him to mingle with crowds, to speak in public, or to carry out the work of preaching and exhortation to penance that he regarded as an essential component of his mission to the people. If we add to all this the other sufferings—which we will discuss later—that were kept hidden but were stirred by the stigmata, we will comprehend why he needed continual help and companionship during these years. To this fact we owe the valuable ensemble of information transmitted to us by those who were with him, which was handed over to the minister general Crescentius of Jesi. These people were the "*nos qui cum eo fuimus.*" Their importance up to this time had been underrated. However, in this study, we have attempted to make esssential use of them, especially in this last part. They were the companions and witnesses, as we stated earlier, of a long martyrdom brought on by the illnesses yet also heightened by the tension felt over the institutional systematization of the order. It was aggravated by the saint himself owing to his unshakable

determination to remain an example for all at any cost. This is the most evident and impressive feature, as seen from our perspective, of the saint's activity during these years, dating from his return from Palestine and from his illness onward. Even though at times he had to yield to illness and was forced to limit his activity in public, his personal commitment and his will to conform to Christ and give good example to all remained unaltered.

In order to relate to the world, he was compelled more than ever to resort to writing. This can be inferred from the fact that the greatest part of the short works that still survive date from the last years of his life, and are divided into three principal groups: actual letters written for specific situations, short works of spiritual and ascetic exhortation in substitution for mission—any activity had become practically impossible for him—and prayers and devotions. Of these writings we have already examined by themselves the rules and the letter to Anthony. They have their own specific character independent of particular situations and were addressed to the community's way of life. We will discuss also separately his poetic text in Italian, the "Canticle of the Sun," because of its special usefulness toward understanding Francis' vision of the world.

Except for letters sent to Brother Leo, very few have come down to us, and in some ways these could be placed in the second category of his works. The correspondence with Clare, as stated above, is lost, except for the fragment on fasting and exhortation that was recently discovered. Also lost are a letter to the inhabitants of Bologna, mentioned by Thomas of Eccleston, and one addressed to the friars in France. In the precise sense of the term, the only letter written in response to a specific situation is the one entitled *Epistola ad quendam ministrum* [letter to a minister] in preparation for a general chapter and for the decisions to be made by it. From its tone and format one draws the impression that it was addressed to a person in whom the saint had friendly trust. Yet the initial "N," indicating the addressee, does not belong to any known individual, and

the supposition that it was addressed to Brother Elias has no basis in fact. It is more worthwhile to examine its content, divided into two principal parts. The one that embodies Francis' presence more fully is the first part, spiritual in character, in which he comforts the confrere in the midst of his difficulties *quae impediunt amare Dominum Deum* [which make it difficult to love the Lord God] brought on by his subordinates and by others. There was a tension that had obviously thrown the soul of the minister into a serious crisis. Simply but clearly, Francis reminds him that these difficulties, even to the point of being physically beaten, should always be considered as a grace from God. Indeed, he should wish it to be so, and not otherwise. Moreover, Francis commands him thus under obedience: it is necessary to love those who do these things to the point of not wanting anything more than that they become better Christians. In this spirit of forbearance one acquires more merit than by any time spent in a hermitage. Further, there is need to look with mercy and understanding upon those who make us suffer. When they do something evil, they should find mercy if they are repentant of their fault. Francis' profound understanding of human frailty is expressed here with loving sweetness.

The second part, while of interest for the history of the formation of the friars' system of organization, is of less significance even though it refers to a coming chapter (scholars vary in placing its date somewhere between Pentecost of 1218 and that of 1221), in which there was to be discussion on the policy of the order concerning possible offenses by the friars. These were probably the general problems that were debated before arriving at the determinations in the *Regula non bullata* on the misdeeds that required expulsion from the order.

This is a letter that, while composed by dictation to a collaborator, possesses a ready incisiveness in its confidentiality but also in its desire to see spiritual troubles resolved. The normal awareness of religious life should have been enough to resolve them, but they also afforded

the saint a chance to point out once again ideas that he cherished. It is also worth noting that, in the first part, there are no scriptural references or citations at all, but they do appear in the second part, albeit in an extremely sober manner.

The most important group of his writings is made up of the short works and letters—addressed to the order's hierarchy, to the rulers of the cities, and to the faithful—that dwell upon Francis' favorite ideas. In them he emphasizes their importance and brings out their obligation and worth. We shall turn our attention more to these ideas than to the individual letters, in order to be able to draw out useful elements for reconstructing the saint's religious consciousness and personality.

The theme that most insistently recurs within this group of writings is that of the supreme importance of the sacrament of the Eucharist. It reaches the point that, were we to express a judgment about Francis, we would have to conclude that he was an exceptional zealot of this devotion. We would thus fall, however, into a great error since Francis saw the importance of the sacrament within a much larger framework, although always in reference to Christ. In his mind, Jesus Christ, from birth until death, represented by the very fact of his Incarnation the extraordinary reality of the infinite love and mercy of God. An even more extraordinary testimony of divine love and mercy is the other fact that, once Christ had departed from history and time by his Resurrection and Ascension, he decided wondrously to remain among us, ready for the call of the priest in consecrating the host and the wine. Each time that this act is performed, the sacrifice and love of Christ himself is renewed. On this fact Francis based his deep respect for priests. A priest performs a marvel not by his personal merit, for this would somehow diminish or limit the act of love that is the transubstantiation of bread and wine. Rather he does so in the fullness of his responsibility for the power with which he is vested. He should thus live up to this with exemplary dignity and holiness of life. He should also

steadfastly honor the Eucharist, guarding it with the greatest care and respect. The sacrament of the altar is Christ himself present in the midst of all people.

Francis expresses these ideas in the two distinct versions of his *Epistola ad clericos*. He stresses the same points again along with further details in his two *Epistolae ad custodes*: the first is the more thorough in specifics, the second is the more concise and abridged. It will be useful to examine the essentials of the provisions in the first letter: "With everything I am capable of and more, I beg you to ask the clergy with all humility, when it is called for and you think it is a good idea, to have the greatest possible reverence for the Body and Blood of our Lord Jesus Christ, together with his holy name and the writings which contain his words, those words which consecrate his Body. They should set the greatest value, too, on chalices, corporals, and all the ornaments of the altar that are related to the holy Sacrifice. If the Body of our Lord has been left in a poverty-stricken place, they [i.e. the clergy] should put it somewhere that is properly prepared for it, according to church law, so that it will be kept safe. They should carry it about with the greatest reverence and be discreet in administering it to others. If the name of God or the writings that contain his words are found lying in the dust, they should be picked up and put in a suitable place. In all your sermons you shall tell the people of the need to do penance, impressing on them that no one can be saved unless he receives the Body and Blood of our Lord. When the priest is offering sacrifice at the altar or the Blessed Sacrament is being carried about, everyone should kneel down and give praise, glory, and honor to our Lord and God, living and true. When you are preaching, too, tell the people about the glory that is due him, so that at every hour and when the bells are rung, praise and thanks may be offered to Almighty God by everyone all over the world."

This is a page from which the saint's feelings leap out with essential clarity and immediacy, as well as with a precise and specific understanding of church life that is

experienced with a sense of concord that is rarely expressed elsewhere to such great effect. The *Epistola ad populorum rectores* shares something of the same perspective and can be understood within the same mental framework. It has its own characteristic thrust, balanced on two distinct points. Its second point deals with the Eucharist, while the first one, more general in scope, invokes the religious responsibility that is indissolubly connected with the civil responsibility entrusted to them. Francis indeed begins with a nod of understanding, showing himself to be aware of the weighty concerns that press upon their shoulders. They surely have the *curam et sollicitudines saeculi* [temporal care and concerns - Tr.]. However, precisely because of these, they ought not to forget God and his commandments, for which they should feel equally responsible, unless they seek to fall under God's curse. They, the rulers of nations, also run a more serious risk than others do: "The more wise and powerful they will have been in the world, the greater will be their torment in hell." After this solemn preamble, the instruction that Francis sets down for them would seem rather modest: "Set behind you all care and worry, and receive the most holy Body and most holy Blood of Christ with good will in his memory." He then closes by praying that the people placed in their charge venerate and honor God, unless they want to answer for it on the day of judgment.

While reviewing under some aspects the spiritual horizon of the eucharistic piety that we have brought out by examining these letters and admonitions, it is worth paying special attention to his *Epistola toto ordini missa*. It was sent at an uncertain date, apparently after 1220. In it, Francis, *homo vilis et caducus* [a vile and fallen man - Tr.] and the *parvulus servulus* [lowly servant - Tr.] addresses his confreres in the name of Christ, whether they rank among the hierarchy of the order, or are among all the friars, simple and obedient, first and last. He begins with a general exhortation in which he asks them to obey "the Lord's counsels and commandments"—the expression has

technical meaning in the spiritual idiom of that epoch—and then insists on the duty of offering all reverence and honor, as far as possible, to the most holy Body and Blood of our Lord Jesus Christ. In him, [the passage is from Paul, Col 1:20] the things of heaven and earth are pacified and reconciled through Almighty God. He then turns to the priests of the order and reminds them of the purity and holiness with which the Mass and the consecration of the Body and Blood of Christ are celebrated. He warns that anyone not acting accordingly will be a traitor like Judas and "guilty of the Body and Blood of Christ" (as Paul states in 1 Cor 11:27). Concerning veneration of the Body of Christ, he continues to stress a series of points that, while arising simply and spontaneously from Francis' heart, help us to grasp more deeply his personal religious feelings: "If it is right to honor the Blessed Virgin Mary because she bore him in her most holy womb; if St. John the Baptist trembled and was afraid even to touch Christ's sacred hand; if the tomb where he lay for only a short time is so venerated; how holy, and virtuous, and worthy should not a priest be. He touches Christ with his own hands, Christ who is to die no more but enjoy eternal life and glory, upon whom the angels desire to look." This series of references, which reflect on Christ "in time" and on the "eternal" Christ, sheds light on the priest's lofty dignity. It also affords us a closer look at Francis' Christology.

He proceeds further with a series of reflections on priestly dignity, at once exalted and awesome. After admonitions and exhortations on the celebration of Mass, the letter closes with what one may call a general confession by Francis himself. From it, through a kind of conversation with the minister general, Brother Elias, he passes on to exalt and affirm the duty of being a worthy Friar Minor. The passage below follows the outline of the *Confiteor* exactly: "I confess all my sins to God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit; to Blessed Mary ever Virgin and all the saints in heaven and on earth; to Brother Elias, the minister general of our order; and to all my other blessed

brothers that I have sinned in many ways, through my own grievous fault, and in particular by not keeping the rule which I promised to God, and by not saying the office, as the rule prescribes, through carelessness or sickness, or because I am ignorant and have never studied. ("And so I beseech Brother Elias, the minister general, my superior, to see that the rule is observed inviolably by all, and that the clerics say the office devoutly, not concentrating on the melody of the chant, but being careful that their hearts are in harmony so that their words may be in harmony with their hearts and their hearts with God. Their aim should be to please God by purity of heart, not to soothe the ears of the congregation by their sweet singing. I myself promise to observe this strictly, as God gives me the grace and I will hand it on to the friars who are with me so that they too may put it into practice in the office and in other prescriptions of the rule. If a friar refuses to do this, I will not regard him as a Catholic or as one of my friars and I even refuse to see or speak with him until he repents. I say the same for all those others who go wandering about with no thought for regular discipline. Our Lord Jesus Christ gave his life rather than fail in the obedience he owed his most holy Father.

("Through our Lord Jesus Christ, I, Brother Francis, worthless as I am and an unworthy creature of the Lord God, command Brother Elias, minister general of the order, and all his successors, with the other superiors and guardians, present and to come, to keep a copy of this letter and put it into practice, preserving it carefully. I beseech them to observe scrupulously all that is written in it and to see that it is observed by others, according to the good pleasure of almighty God, now and forever, as long as the world lasts.") The letter concludes with a prayer that is certainly beautiful, but one also discerns the contribution of some other person well-versed in liturgical language.

This text, in its variety and complexity, is broad and refreshing in its scope, humanly alive and profoundly close to Francis' spirit. This is especially evident in the

concluding part, once his biblical citations have been completed. The same statement, leaving aside the obligatory liturgical introduction, rapidly becomes the revelation of his soul to the people he calls his brothers.

We find ourselves, then, looking at a plan of life for the order. In his humility he utters a prayer that, in its formulation, turns out to be a command to the minister general as well as to all the friars, from the priests to the lowliest lay brothers. Its inner coherence brings us into contact with a precise and systematic scheme that reveals the exact meaning of this letter. It seems to embody the premise, perhaps as the first document bearing this message, with which Francis sought to avert from his order any deviation from the rule, and to ensure its existence upon a firm and solid base. It is understandable why he addresses all the brethren by warning all of them, yet involving the person of the minister general as well, since the minister has complete and direct responsibility for them. Yet one can see why he asked them all to save the letter with care and zeal. Certainly, it was to be copied and distributed widely. It was to be thought of first of all as a letter, yet also as the first among those documents which, while having no normative power nor juridical obligation, would remain as exhortations and admonitions, thus serving to express ideals of spiritual life.

Within this psychological dimension, the abovementioned confession of Francis assumes central importance. He, being the servant of them all, could not appoint himself as judge unless he first had the courage to judge himself. He therefore set for himself a standard of judgment as a consistent basis that would permit him to talk and make comparisons with other people. This basis of judgment does not lie in Francis' personal behavior, since he would not fail to point out those things that he singled out for blame in himself: vainglory, whenever he did any meritorious deed, and gluttony. It is important to stress this in order to clarify the essence and meaning of his letter and his specific point of view. In the light of the rule he identified his own failures and

omissions. Specifically, he had not used due diligence in reciting the breviary and explained why he had not. He was not afraid to accuse himself of negligence; yet his illnesses and his limited education (meaning here his inability to read in accordance with the recital techniques then in use in religious orders) also played a role together with his immediate concern: choral recitation should not lend itself to vocal exhibitionism aimed at pleasing the listeners. Rather it should remain prayer in which the mind follows the voice by raising itself to God. He thus reconfirmed his intention of respecting the rule and expected the same attitude from his confreres. Those, however, who did not respect it were no longer friars or even Catholics. He did not want to see or speak with such people until they had done penance. He felt the same way about those who, instead of going from country to country carrying out their missionary preaching, would wander and move from one place to another with no permission, contrary to the example of Christ who, in obedience to the Father, offered his very life.

Francis' letter finds at this point its justification as well as its first and final reason for being, his concern over the weakening of initial fervor and over neglect of the rule. Never shy about speaking in the first person, he blames himself first of all. Yet he does not overlook the faults of others and he challenges them without diluting anything. He calls upon everybody, beginning with himself, to remember their commitments, not to men, but to God himself. This letter, if our interpretation is correct, begins a series of admonishments and statements that concludes with the testaments and the *Testament* of Francis.

This letter concerned the friars directly and opposed any possible initial weakening of the order's original strictness. Still, Francis could not ignore all the other believers who, in one way or another, had communicated to him their burning desire for a life more dedicated to Christian living while remaining in the world. Some were already in married life, others did not feel called to embrace religious life fully. It was to them that his mission

and preaching were basically directed. Being unable to speak with them personally owing to his fragile health, he wrote to them. But when?

Indeed, two letters have come down to us, a short one and a longer and more articulate one. They are both addressed *Ad fideles*. The short one is clearly the earlier, amplified and elaborated in the long letter. Despite this connection, it is not possible to determine any certain dates for them. Scholars waver: some, like Sabatier, place them toward the end of his life; while more recently, others like Esser tend to date them earlier. Since decisive philological arguments on this matter do not appear to exist, perhaps it is better to analyze in depth the second letter, the more important one for our purposes. We need not worry about determining the time interval between the two, even though the reasons we examine might lead us to think that the interval was short.

One reason for assigning a relatively late date to both letters, especially to the second, is the fact that the second letter is addressed "To all Christians, religious, clerics, and layfolk, men and women: to everyone in the whole world, Brother Francis, their servant and subject, sends his humble respects, imploring for them true peace from heaven and sincere love in God." A salutation of this kind presupposes a wide fame, a vast public, and a call for a wide and varied spiritual direction. This can be imagined only with difficulty before the last years of his life, sometime before 1222-1223, during a time when the movement did not yet have a wide public. Moreover, Francis did not yet have the fame and following of his final years, not only in Italy, but also through the new settlements and missions in France and elsewhere. Another meaningful aspect is that he was unable to visit them all "*propter infirmitatem et debilitatem mei corporis.*" It is true, as Esser points out, that, even before his most serious illness, the saint had to give up journeys and missions. However, this time the sickness and weakness that the letter talks about are, judging from the letter's tone, of the kind that obviously cannot be healed. The letter, particularly the second

one, is indeed not provisional but definitive and conclusive.

The first letter does seem, however, to be provisional, with its division into *De illis qui faciunt penitentiam* and *De illis qui non agunt penitentiam.* [those who do penance and those who do not] He invites the former to a Christian life that will bring them to enjoyment of the fruits of eternal happiness, whereas damnation awaits those who, seduced by worldly goods and the pleasures of the flesh, serve the Devil. They reap damnation after their death, cursed by their heirs on earth because they failed to acquire more wealth, and worms consume their bodies.

The bipolarity of the first letter appears again in the second. This one begins by exalting the Incarnation and life of Christ, presented as an example by reason of the poverty he chose, the life he led, the institution of the Eucharist, the sacrifice of the cross, and his total abandonment to the will of the Father. In this way Christ appears as the truest example for our eternal salvation, even though few people want to follow him. They do not know or fail to reflect adquately that they are thus bringing down God's curse upon themselves, whereas his blessing descends only upon those who love him. This love, however, cannot remain merely a matter of feeling, but must be expressed in action.

At this point the letter becomes a series of specifics. It is necessary to confess all one's sins to a priest, to receive the Eucharist, to perform the works of mercy and penance, and to love one's neighbor as oneself. And here Francis makes a correction that displays all his knowledge of the human heart which he perceives without illusions: "Anyone who will not or cannot love his neighbor as himself should at least do him good and not do him any harm." This is indeed a realism free from any illusion on the part of one who knows how capable the human heart is of evil. One specific point reminds judges of the practice of mercy, and everyone of charity and humility. These are the only things that pass with us beyond death, at the moment in which we are forced to abandon all worldly goods.

The ensuing norms of life, stating a series of specific spiritual duties, seem to confirm Francis' intention to address people seeking a higher life of piety: "We are also bound to fast and to avoid vice and sin, taking care not to give way to excess in food and drink, and we must be Catholics. We should visit churches often and show great reverence for the clergy, not just for them personally, for they may be sinners, but because of their high office, for it is they who administer the most holy Body and Blood of our Lord Jesus Christ. They offer it in sacrifice at the altar, and it is they who receive it and administer it to others. We should realize, too, that no one can be saved except by the Blood of our Lord Jesus Christ and by the holy words of God, and it is the clergy who tell us his words and administer the Blessed Sacrament, and they alone have the right to do it, and no one else. Religious especially are bound to make greater efforts, without neglecting the duties of ordinary Christians, because they have left the world. We should love our enemies and do good to those who hate us. We are bound to order our lives according to the precepts and counsels of our Lord Jesus Christ, and so we must renounce self and bring our lower nature into subjection under the yoke of obedience; this is what we have all promised God. However, no one can be bound to obey another in anything that is sinful or criminal!" After dwelling on the forms and kinds of obedience, the letter continues with other traits characteristic of Francis: "It is not for us to be wise and calculating in the world's fashion. We should be guileless, lowly, and pure. We should hold our lower nature in contempt, as a source of shame to us, because through our own fault we are wretched and utterly corrupt, nothing more than worms.... We should not want to be in charge of others; we are to be servants, and should be subject to every human creature." Whoever succeeds in keeping faith with this commitment and with sincere devotion to Christ will gain eternal life and the happiness of seeing God.

They who do not follow the Christian life, however,

are ripe for damnation. They think they are rich and powerful; they yield to temptation and sin; they are slaves of their worries and worldly ambitions; and fail to realize that they are the prey of diabolical temptations, by which they are blinded and led to perdition. All that they believe they have earned is lost with death. Surely they fear this, but when they confess and the priest asks them, "Do you want to make restitution from your own goods for the things you have done and the things for which you have defrauded and tricked people?" they say no, for they have already distributed them among relatives and heirs. They have nothing to say and die condemned, because the Devil immediately bears their souls away. For an instant, the memory of his youthful life resurfaces in this example of one who refused to return ill-gotten goods. These are few lines, but they draw a realistic and effective picture of life as it is really lived. The conclusion is made in the first person: Francis *minor servus vester* asks that you listen to him in the prayer that he makes in humility and love, that whoever follows his counsels will be saved.

Can we term this letter a rule? Could it indeed be the rule of the aforementioned *fratres de penitentia*, who had ties with the Franciscans? We doubt it, since explicit reference is made at some points to *religiosi*. The *fratres de penitentia* could not have been such, nor could clerics, who are also mentioned in the letter. It is, we think, a letter of exhortation and admonition, to use two words that Francis highly valued. It is a letter addressed to all believers, as an ideal roadmap for reaching salvation. In this sense the first letter seems to differ insofar as it specifically talks about those who do penance and those who do not. Yet there must be no confusion between doing penance as an individual and personal thing and being a *frater de penitentia* as a juridical status, clearly specified and defined.

In his two letters, Francis is asking and recommending that penance be done, and that people live by what is required of Christians. He is not asking anyone to enter the state of the *fratres de penitentia*. That the two letters

could subsequently serve pious laity as a statement of Christian living as envisioned and taught by the saint is very probable. They could therefore have served as "rules" for "laity" seeking to follow a plan of devout life as taught by Francis. However, we can also discern in these letters the germ of the idea of the Third Order, which was beginning to take shape during the final years of the saint's life. Unfortunately, historical data on the Third Order's early development are sparse.

Of no less importance in both letters, especially the second, are the signs of some of Francis' mental attitudes. We have seen them emerge regularly over the course of his life and, now, in his writings. A major one is his unshakable devotion to priests and, as we have repeatedly stated, to priests as endowed with the power to consecrate the Body and Blood of Christ. Within this fundamental attitude it is extremely significant, particularly in view of the heretical currents of his age, that he insists on the validity of eucharistic consecration by them even *si sint peccatores*, if they are sinners, i.e., if it is common knowledge that they are guilty of something. Even in this case it is necessary to respect them. His attitude is noteworthy since in other regions of Europe, a few years earlier in a local synod, the faithful were enjoined not to attend the Mass of a sinner-priest.

No less relevant is that Francis promotes the following not only of the *praecepta*, i.e., the commandments, but also of the *consilia*, the counsels of Christ. Once again we are faced with a central problem for Franciscan spirituality and for the scope that it set for itself. For salvation it was enough to follow the *praecepta* of Christ. However—and this is a fresh perspective offered by the saint—it is also necessary to obey Christ's *consilia*, the ones observed only by those aspiring to a higher perfection. As one example, Waldo, in formulating his *propositum*, stated that he wanted to follow *et praecepta et consilia*. Francis considered them to be on the same plane, if someone wanted to be truly Christian. Another word for it, which had technical meaning at the beginning of the thirteenth

century, was *catholicus*, thus orthodox.

Assuming that we have correctly understood the meaning and the overall tone of these two letters, it appears that Francis takes love as the basis for everything, especially the love of Christ and, through him who offered his life for us, the love of neighbor. There is a twofold appeal for this love of neighbor with a minor difference that, in our view, stems from the fact that the letter, after being dictated, had to be touched up and finished, a normal procedure in the Middle Ages. In this case it was embellished with scriptural passages by a secretary. The first appeal for the love of neighbor has, it seems, the authentic mark of Francis' spirit and realism. He is secure in his knowledge of the human heart—he read the hearts of his brothers, according to all the sources—when he says to love one's very enemies or, if one does not succeed in loving them, at least to do them no harm but rather do them good. The second appeal, however, is quite formal, placed within a series of gospel passages; it lacks the vibrancy and vitality of the first one. After this section, strong in the first letter but even harsher in the second, comes the narrative of the rich man's—a merchant, to be sure—last confession, which speaks of his ill-gotten goods and the things for which he had defrauded and deceived other people. Then, the story continues, the callous discontent of the heirs becomes evident when they discover that the inheritance is more meager than they had counted on. But we have already reviewed this.

With this plan of Christian living the letters come to a close. While stemming from a need to communicate with others, they carry out his desire to address himself to everyone and to extend to them the words, counsels, and admonitions that he could not speak to them directly. In contrast, there is another text that, while not a letter, still meets the same need. It is one of the most interesting writings that Francis left to us: the *Admonitiones*.

This brief work has been and continues to be the object of much lively discussion, that attempts to solve the problem of its essence and purpose. Is it a running

discourse, or one of Francis' sermons, or a collection of sayings arranged by Francis himself or by others? To what extent was the work modified by a secretary or collaborator? When was it composed? The answers have varied and, obviously, people supporting one or another thesis have disagreed, using more-or-less valid arguments that are all plausible. We will not try to provide other solutions, but, on the basis of the preceding discussion, will point out the one that seems to be the most probable. In the first place, in line with what we have said above, we are inclined to date this work within the last years of his life. This was the time when Francis' relations with other people had to be reduced to a minimum. Almost exclusively they had to be just contacts with the companions charged with his care, with some officials such as the order's ministers, or with Cardinal Ugolino of Ostia, as well as rare appearances in public. It does not seem to be a sermon, since it does not conform to the technical directives of the *ars praedicandi* nor to the vibrant exhortations of the *ars concionandi*. It comes across more as brotherly encouragement and friendly admonition, as we have found in various earlier letters. One could consider it—and herein lies its real importance—a synthesis of spiritual viewpoints that Francis customarily insisted upon, arranged in order of interest and involvement, but without any clearly discernible connecting pattern. Thus, they are Francis' essential thoughts. The fact that they lack a unifying framework leads to the conclusion that they were collected and arranged by another writer. Certainly the title comes from someone else.

Right now we cannot examine all the admonitions one by one. Before all else, however, we can remark that they embody, with few modifications, the points that the saint stressed during his earthly existence. In this sense it is counted as a writing intended to condense the experiences of one man's life. It fits perfectly within their logic that the first of the admonitions insists upon respect for and the meaning and value of the sacrament of the Eucharist. It reinforces the teaching that the sacrament constitutes

the perpetuation, "under the appearance of bread and wine," of the fact that Jesus Christ, second Person of the Trinity, was made flesh and lived among us. However, the admonition boldly asserts a comparison between the visibility of the Man-Christ as God and the visibility of the sacrament-Christ as God: "[Christ] shows himself to us in this sacred bread just as he once appeared to his apostles in real flesh. With their own eyes they saw only his flesh; but they believed that he was God, because they contemplated him with the eyes of the spirit. We, too, with our own eyes, see only bread and wine, but we must see further and firmly believe that this is his most holy Body and Blood, living and true. In this way our Lord remains continually with his followers." This is perhaps the highest point, and certainly one of the most significant points as regards the importance and decisive meaning that the Eucharist has for Francis of Assisi. From the second through the fifth of the admonitions, the focus shifts to the problems of the psychology—to use a modern term—of obedience and humility, of guilt and original sin, returning again to the problem of obedience and also of pride. This set of thoughts culminates in pointing to the only example in which a Christian can take pride and which he should follow: the example of the cross of the Lord. The central point of this is the sixth *Admonitio: De imitatione Domini*, with its polite irony toward anyone who says one thing and does another: "Look at the Good Shepherd, my brothers. To save his sheep he endured the agony of the cross. They followed him in trials and persecutions, in ignominy, hunger, and thirst, in humiliations and temptations, and so on. And for this God rewarded them with eternal life. We ought to be ashamed of ourselves. The saints endured all that, but we who are servants of God try to win honor and glory by recounting and making known what they have done." The necessity of faith lived out in the reality of works and not in the emptiness of words is vigorously stated. Yet there is perhaps also a courteous point made against those—and one could not help but think to some extent of the clergy

or of churchmen—who wanted "honor and glory" by telling about the pain, suffering, and merits of Jesus and the apostles, but who stayed away from repeating them and experiencing them in the first person.

No less attention is deserved by the seventh *Admonitio*, where Francis offers a very personal interpretation of the well-known passage from 2 Corinthians 3:6: "The letter kills, but the Spirit gives life." Rejecting the lure of allegory and any exegesis based on allegory's four forms, he underscores the worth of the Word of God, such as it is without distortions that falsify its spirit and seduce one into pride: "A man has been killed by the letter when he wants to know quotations only so that people will think he is very learned and he can make money to give to his relatives and friends. A religious has been killed by the letter when he has no desire to follow the spirit of Sacred Scripture, but wants to know what it says only so that he can explain it to others. On the other hand, those have received life from the spirit of Sacred Scripture who, by their words and example, refer to the most high God, to whom belongs all good, all that they have or wish to know, and do not allow their knowledge to become a source of self-complacency."

This passage pointedly confirms and reasserts his distrust of theological knowledge as being something merely intellectual, lacking reference to concrete practice, with no transference into life of what has been learned. Moreover, the truth that springs from common sense flourishes in the face of every theological school. By it key words are sheltered from allegorisms, while their spirit, which quickens, puts them into true and practical action, thus displaying the deepest truth and meaning of these words, a "spiritual" meaning that is capable of achieving "spiritual" acts.

Further along, he condemns the sin of envy, and declares that the true love for our enemies consists in bearing the pain of the sin committed by the other in carrying out a hostile action, and in repaying him with goodness. He then stresses the importance of keeping in

check one's own body, the cause of all sin. Finally, after recommending that bad example be avoided, one further *Admonitio* brings us into a dimension that is very important to Francis. It is the twelfth one, *De cognoscendo spiritu Domini*, knowing the Spirit of the Lord, where he states, "We can be sure that a man is a true religious and has the spirit of God if his lower nature does not give way to pride when God accomplishes some good through him, and if he seems all the more worthless and inferior to others in his own eyes. Our lower nature is opposed to every good." After a fervent mention of patience, he offers two thoughts on poverty of spirit and on peace. They make clear, as if there were ever a need to do so, the depth and penetration of Francis' insight into the human heart. The paragraph on poverty reads, "*Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven* (Mt 5:3). There are many people who spend all their time at their prayers and other religious exercises and mortify themselves by long fasts and so on. But if anyone says as much as a word that implies a reflection on their self-esteem or takes something from them, they are immediately up in arms and annoyed. These people are not really poor in spirit. A person is really poor in spirit when he hates himself and loves those who strike him in the face." On peace he says, "*Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called the children of God* (Mt 5:9). They are truly peacemakers who are able to preserve their peace of mind and heart for love of our Lord Jesus Christ, despite all that they suffer in this world."

The work follows, after the model of the Sermon on the Mount, with a series of points based on the beatitudes. Indeed, one could term them the beatitudes of Francis. Blessed are the clean of heart (XVI). Blessed is the servant who knows how to be humble (XVII). Blessed is the man who aids his neighbor (XVIII). Blessed is the servant who does not regard himself as better than others (XIX). Blessed is the religious who rejoices only in the words and works of God (XXI). Blessed is the servant who knows how to speak with care; woe to the religious who boasts of his

merits. Blessed is the servant who humbly accepts corrections and rebukes (XXIII). Blessed is the servant who is humble among the humble (XXIV). Blessed is the servant who loves even those who cannot help him, because they are ill or far away (XXV). Blessed is the servant who honors the clergy, even sinful clerics (XXVI).

Prior to the final beatitude, there is a deft composite portrait of the ideal servant of God, one who thinks about him alone:

> Where there is Love and Wisdom,
> there is neither Fear nor Ignorance.
> Where there is Patience and Humility,
> there is neither Anger nor Annoyance.
> Where there is Poverty and Joy,
> there is neither Cupidity nor Avarice.
> Where there is Peace and Contemplation,
> there is neither Care nor Restlessness.
> Where there is the Fear of God to guard the dwelling,
> there no enemy can enter.
> Where there is Mercy and Prudence,
> there is neither Excess nor Harshness.

This is perhaps the most effective summation of the ideal not only of Friars Minor, but also of the Christian in general, as Francis considered him to be in the deep sense of the term—one who intends to serve God with all his heart. Yet another interesting aspect is the pattern of antitheses that shows the balance of factors that Francis kept in mind. If we try to grasp the unifying motive behind it all, it is to be found surely in interior peace attained by interior recollection that does not exclude the world nor flee from it, but wins by overcoming it. This ideal of peace also marks the highest and most mature level that Francis is capable of reaching. It lies not so much in the exemplary practice that led him to be strict with himself but rather in his thoughtful reflection on the character of the true Christian. The true Christian is one who has attained peace, the peace that Francis tried to sow

during his whole life, as his most difficult and trying ideal and as the mainspring that had driven him to the decisive choice of his conversion. He had found that he was able to leave behind the restless dissatisfaction of his greed for money, his hunger for glory, and his carousing in crowds with his pack of friends. He was able to pass into another sphere of values that was certainly difficult and trying, but that could lead him through sacrifice and renunciation into peace. His greeting, "God give you peace," linked the two greatest goods that man could imagine and strive for: God in eternity and inner peace in the world.

Whoever is able to achieve all this will also be able to attain the highest of the beatitudes: this is stated in the twenty-eighth and last *Admonitio*. "Blessed the religious who treasures up for heaven the favors God has given him and does not want to show them off for what he can get out of them. God himself will reveal his works to whomsoever he pleases. Blessed the religious who keeps God's marvelous doings to himself." This final thought, which may seem mystical or even enigmatic, becomes readily clear in the light of what has been said so far. There is no call to expect immediate recompense for one's merits, few or many, here on earth, but rather to have the most complete trust in God. For this too is a beatitude: know how to guard the secret of God, know how to wait until he manifests the eventual recognition of the merits of his servant.

These *Admonitiones* constitute the culmination of the group of brief works that Francis authored with the purpose of communicating by written word with his "public," to use the technical term appropriately proposed by Auerbach. They compensated for his sometime inability to reach them with the spoken word. Yet the saint was also a man of the Church and realized that he had become such. This involved a series of specific obligations and duties especially on the level of prayer and liturgy, which he observed as a matter of course.

Now we come to the third group of his brief works, in which we see more than ever the hands of collaborators

or "specialists." We pointed this factor out earlier in speaking about the letters sent to the entire order, particularly the closing prayer. The *Exhortatio ad laudem Dei* [*Praises of God*], the *Expositio in Pater noster* [The *Paraphrase of the Our Father*], the *Laudes ad omnes horas dicendas* [the *Praises Before the office*], the *Oratio ante crucifixum,* [the *Office of the Cross*], the *Salutatio Beatae Mariae Virginis* [*Salutation of the Blessed Virgin*], and the *Salutatio virtutum* [*The Praises of the Virtues*] are regarded, by and large, as devotional outpourings of a soul deeply sensitive to the liturgical aspects of the daily life of a man of the Church. It will be helpful to examine more closely the *Officium passionis Domini* since it brings us into the heart of one of the most salient, intense, and lively aspects of Francis' spirituality, namely, the remembrance of and reflection upon Christ crucified. It is hardly necessary to recall that, everything considered, this point was central to the saint's inspiration and decisive choice. He decided to pass into the midst of outcasts, for Christ had chosen to spend his own life, especially at its end, among outcasts. Not only had he died among human beings—which by itself would have been a great action on the part of God's Son—but he had also chosen, as St. Paul pointed out, death on a cross. This *Officium*, insofar as we are informed by a tradition written as a preamble to the text of the *Officium* itself, was recited regularly by the saint, both before and along with the canonical hours of the ordinary office of clerics. It consisted of a group of psalms in orderly arrangement in line with the pattern of the canonical hours. It rests on two bases: the Virgin Mary, Mother of Christ, and Christ himself. While a proper antiphon refers to the Blessed Virgin, all the psalm passages, selected to make up a continuous series, aim at calling to mind the sacrificial merit of Christ and the boundless gratitude that man owes him for redemption, which saved man from slavery to the Devil and won for him his salvation.

The parts of this office form a coherent whole, arranged with great skill, and with a gradual progression of themes that are appropriate and well-chosen. Yet the whole thing

also fully responds to Francis' personal piety and devotional need. Without denying unreasonably that the initial idea and general design came from Francis, the impression still remains that, at particular points and in the choice of certain passages, some collaborator must have had a hand. There must at least have been a mutual and continual exchange of ideas between the saint and someone with scriptural competence adequate for liturgical practice.

From this perspective, the *Officium* contributes significantly to our deeper understanding of the immediate value the passion of Christ had for Francis: it was directly and continually present in his mind and religious feelings. Christ crucified meant a living reality in his eyes and in his mind, as well as the basis and reason for his conversion and for all his subsequent conduct and action. By the Lord's passion the inner coherence of Francis' religious and human personality is strengthened, confirmed, and clarified. It is precisely in his relation with Christ crucified that he finds the point of relation with the external world and with other believers. Christ is the sign, the path, and the means through which he knows he can reach those people who at least feel the same presence and commitment.

The liturgical aspect of Francis' works also helps to outline his mature and unified personality, turned reasonably toward a piety that was not austerely closed in upon itself, but open for expressing itself to others. This seems to be indicated especially by the other prayers that we mentioned above. They are, in our opinion, a testimony to his outpouring of feeling, to his need to express himself, and to his living his own faith even outside the liturgy's rules and norms. This corresponds—even though to suggest chronologies for these works is a practically hopeless cause—to his need to recollect himself in prayer, to meditate upon God and upon his work of creating, consecrating, and redeeming human beings. Thus there survives, despite being faded by time and diminished by the loss of documentation, the echo of his increasing prayer and of his permanent colloquy with God.

As we remarked above, it was characteristic of the times when Francis was not mingling among people, after his duties of preaching and missionary work, for him to retire in the nocturnal silence to his own hut or to the solitude of a hermitage. It was an intense kind of praying, an immediate liaison with God, an elevation of the soul toward eternal things. These are but a few of the many testimonies concerning his prayer life that have come down to us.

If we are to draw a conclusion from the three groups of brief works that we have examined, it can be that they contribute in no small measure to our understanding of the human reality and even, in a sense, of the consistency of Francis. Our attempt has been to liberate his biography from anecdotal incrustations which tend to accentuate characteristics, singularities, and marvels at the expense of things that are historically and humanly more valid and meaningful. Freed from such overlay, his biography displays a personality striving to live out an ideal first as a lone individual, namely, his own choice of a place in society; yet later this choice surprisingly becomes an example at first for some and later for many others. A consequence is that, having considered, chosen, and carried out this ideal, he enters into perpetual conflict with the reality around him, obliging him to a process of evolution and adaptation. He becomes obliged to make a permanent distinction between what he must preserve at all costs and what he may "condescend" or consent to, by way of acceding to the request of his confreres. They have become an aggregate of thousands of people from the few that they were at the beginning.

His life, then, would seem to have been directed completely toward others: ordinary people, religious, prelates, cardinals, and pontiffs. However, Francis himself and all who saw and knew him, such as Jacques de Vitry, point out that his ideal and plan of life, growing from a personal thing into an order recognized by the Church, took its origin from an intensely religious inspiration that quickened and supported it.

The writings give us this soul of his. They help us to grasp the meaning of certain requests, the value of certain attitudes, and the significance of certain deeds. A more intense light, projected with greater concentration, produces clearer insight into Francis' personality. Even though he had to become a writer, or at least a compiler and editor of normative texts, he lives in a spiritual dimension that is obviously inspired by the life and preaching of Jesus Christ. These are known to him not indirectly through theological or exegetical studies, but directly in the gospel texts themselves. They are read not through allegories of various kinds, but rather right from the texts themselves, understood in their precise sense and literal meaning. The biblical quotations, especially from the New Testament, are found in abundance in several of his writings. They may have been selected by some expert, but woven into the texts personally written or dictated by Francis himself. Their purpose may have been to corroborate, clarify, or complete what he himself had said. Yet they were included for their literal sense, namely, whatever the words state in their essential, simple reality. Even the liturgical texts, including his *Officium*, are laden with scriptural passages that, when combined, express a literal meaning that recalls Christ and his passion.

These brief works of Francis provide us with a deep explanation and a possibility of grasping his central and fundamental inspiration. Even though these texts are not totally probative by themselves, many scholars correctly place them at the center of any interpretation of Francis' mind.

2 *The Italian Writings*

The "Canticle" or "Canticle of the Sun," perhaps better known under the title of the "Canticle of Creatures," corresponds to this central element of Francis' personality with a perfect consonance between written word and living action. Yet it also distinguishes itself among these works through a series of characteristics that

deserve to be put clearly into evidence.

In the first place, it was written entirely in Italian and not in Latin. This fact is revolutionary for several reasons. To begin with, it broke with the tradition that called for prayer to be expressed in Latin, especially in Italy, where respect for the language had remained strong in educated circles and particularly in the Church. Further, Francis had to consider, in addressing his friars, clerics, and the faithful in general, that they spoke different languages. Communicating with them all required the use of the language that was more or less understood by all of them, namely, Latin. Now, however, close to the end of his life, he wanted to address the people who had known him since birth, among whom he had lived and in whose midst, first under insults but then to growing applause, he had experienced his conversion. These people were his fellow Umbrians, his fellow Italians.

There was another reason for this break from tradition. In his Latin writings, particularly in the more directive ones, he had always needed the collaboration of secretaries. Either they would revise his grammar and syntax, with greater refinement in proportion to the importance of the subject in Francis' mind, or they would complement his thoughts with biblical passages. With the *Canticle*, however, he could finally express himself in his own language that he had learned on the lap and from the lips of his mother. It was in this language that he had advised, admonished, and exhorted the crowds. It was this language that had served him in making known to others, through difficult times of scorn and insult, his firm and steadfast ideal. He could speak, therefore, whatever his heart desired. To be sure, there are many biblical resonances here, ranging from the canticle of thanksgiving in the Book of Daniel by the young men in the furnace to the many passages drawn from the Psalms, singing and exalting the glory of God and of creation. Yet the use of the vernacular permitted Francis, in remembering and reusing these sources, to base upon them the direct experience of his own life; such as the beauty of the valley of

Spoleto (*"Nil vidi ego pulchrius valle mea spoletana"* [I have never seen anything fairer than my valley of Spoleto - Tr.], he had once said). Another example is his prayer to the fire at the time of his cauterization, when he implored it to be courtly, since he had always loved it.

These preliminary yet essential observations lead to another problem, the importance of which cannot be denied: was the *Canticle* composed all at once or in three stages? The three stages are alleged to have been at the bishop's palace when he composed the praises of creatures, in the narrow sense of the term; then, when the conflict erupted between the bishop and the *podestà*, whereupon the saint is said to have added the verse on peace and pardon in order to bring peace between them; and finally, as he was dying, he sang the last verse on death. The supporters of the first thesis favoring unitary composition raise one indisputable point in asserting that the *Canticle's* concept is organic and coherent from beginning to end. Its coherence is reinforced, to be frank, by the fact of the deep meaning that peace had in Francis' religious thought. Still, some other facets cannot be overlooked. Since the exaltation of the Creator through his creatures has its own logical and precise conclusion, neither the progression to peace and to those who pardon out of love for God, nor the progression from peace to death are dialectically or lyrically necessary. This rules out the interpretation of Luigi Foscolo Benedetto, which is brought up here only to point out that it has been definitely rejected. Without doubt, there is a unity to the *Canticle*, but it proceeds more from Francis' spirit than from its internal coherence. The strongest objection, however, to the thesis that the composition was totally unitary stems from a fact that, in our judgment, cannot be ignored or underrated. Francis' own companions, who tended him in his illness and looked after him in general, testify that the *Canticle of Brother Sun* at first was composed to end with the praises of the creatures (more on this point when we examine the last part of the saint's life). But then, a quarrel between the bishop, still Guido, and

the *podestà* of the year, apparently Oportolo Bernardi, turned violent and threatened to become even worse. Worried over the risk of combat between religious authority and civil authority, Francis composed the section on peace. He then ordered it sung by two of the friars, who recounted the incident later, both for the bishop and for the *podestà*. Moved deeply by the intervention of one whom they both loved, they reconciled. The last section Francis is said to have added when the end was imminent. The three-phase theory is consistent with his resignation to the will of God which he had commented on often by the example of his life and in his writings. To the whole question of dating the composition let us add that it in no way contradicts the aesthetic unity of the *Canticle*, since it is inherent in Francis' own poetic tension. In enlarging upon the first section, he developed and completed its organic and inner inspiration.

We should now turn our full attention to the first section in order to comprehend this lyric in all its importance and in the fullness of its meaning. It begins by asserting the distance between man and God, with a singular verbal parallel with the beginning of the twenty-fourth and last chapter of the *Regula non bullata*. The poem reads, "Most high, all-powerful, all good, Lord," to him be "all praise, all glory, all honor, and all blessing." Yet man is not worthy even to call him by name. With this distance acknowledged, the praise addressed to God becomes even more profound and inescapably necessary. The same is true for all that God has created, *"Cum tucte le sue creature,"* and especially for the sun, "who brings the day and light you give to us through him." The sun is the first thing he speaks of for its beauty, since "of you, Most High, he bears the likeness." Praise is then rendered to God "through Sister Moon and Stars; in the heavens you have made them, bright and precious and fair," for brother wind and all meteorological phenomena that allow man, through cultivating the land, to procure his sustenance, and for water, of which he exalts its utility, humility, and purity. His praise for brother fire is moving, as if his

terrible cauterization had never happened. He exalts the light that it gives at night: "How beautiful he is, how gay! Full of power and strength." The last among created things that he singles out is the land, of which he evokes a beauty rich with charm: "... who feeds as in her sovereignty and produces various fruits with colored flowers and herbs." The two verses, one on peacemaking and reciprocal pardon, and the other on death, fearful only to those in mortal sin, then follow. In our opinion, he added them at later times. He concludes with a final exhortation to bless the Lord, to thank him, and to serve him with humility.

While this canticle is of extraordinary importance by reason of its composition in Italian, it is also no less so for two other essential reasons that we cannot overlook. One reason is its importance with regard to what the Germans are accustomed to call the *"Sitz im Leben,"* i.e., its place in the concrete reality of life and history. Another is its value in helping us to understand the meaning that the universe has for Francis or, to put it another way, his sense of nature. These two aspects round out his reality and human consistency.

With regard to the historical-religious situation that frames the *Canticle of Brother Sun,* there is no room for error. Without ever engaging explicitly in polemics, it nonetheless serves unquestionably as a response to Catharism. Francis' insistence on the respect and reverence owed to priests is considered to be in answer to the Waldensian opposition to unworthy priests and to the Waldensian refutation of the validity of their sacraments. Francis' repeated affirmation of deep devotion to the Eucharist and to the permanent presence of Christ on earth that it signified was directed in turn against the Cathars. Similarly, the *Canticle's* praise of God as Creator and for what he created strikes at the heart of one of the basic tenets of Catharism, according to which the Creator, or at least the ruler, of the physical world is Satan, as portrayed in the heresy's many and varying myths.

Against these ideas Francis did not resort to theological

argumentation that would have been foreign to his temperament and, frankly, to his level of education. Rather, he brings out two aspects of the world: the omnipotence of God and the positive quality of creation as a work of beauty, implying as well its goodness. Both of these aspects are intuitively persuasive especially for minds not trained in dialectic thinking. The lyricism he uses to exalt the beneficial sun as a symbol of divine power, the beauty of the moon, and the brilliance of the stars could easily challenge the Cathars. Francis may have known—and this is possible, even though the Franciscan sources say nothing about it—that, for the Cathars, the stars were the seats left empty by the angels dragged along by Lucifer when he was expelled from heaven by God. Moreover, according to another heretical myth peculiar to Italy and to Italian contributions to the myths, the sun and the moon were said to be guilty lovers, and the dew was supposed to be a manifestation of their coupling. Another point Francis made in the poem was that water in its purity was a creature of God.

The universe, therefore, cannot be evil: this is the conclusion contained in Francis' *Canticle.* Nor is it hell within which angels are imprisoned. Rather, it is the work and the result of an extraordinary, almighty goodness that, in the creation of the universe, reveals itself to be beauty as well. In addition, this close bond between goodness and beauty contributes to the overall meaning in opposition to Catharism, expressed in the first part of the *Canticle.* One of the heretics' arguments against the divine creation of the world was precisely nature's destructive power as evil. Proof of this for them was found in ugly and deformed beings. The universe that manifests the creative power of beauty, which is God, excludes evil.

We are not in a position to state whether anyone ever remarked that living beings are missing from the *Canticle,* even though there is room in it for peace and death. Not even birds are mentioned in it, despite the fact that Francis loved them greatly. He even spoke to them, if we are to believe a well-known account. There is no need to reject

the story as legendary since, in the recollection of one of his companions, the saint, out of his devotion to Christmas, had wanted its celebration observed in this way: "If some day I could speak with the emperor, I would plead with him for the love of God that he make a law and decree that no one should capture our sisters the larks or do them harm. In the same way I would ask that all the *podestà* of the cities and the lords of the castles be required each year for Christmas to order people to spread wheat and other grains on the roadsides around the cities and castles, in order that our sisters the larks and other birds might have something to eat on that great feast. They ought on that same night also to provide fodder for our brothers the oxen and asses, out of respect for the Son of God whose mother, the Blessed Virgin, placed him in a manger between an ox and an ass. I would likewise beg that all the poor be fed by the rich on the Birthday of the Lord." This passage shows his broad vision of the universe of living things; yet, strangely, Francis does not speak of them in the *Canticle of Brother Sun*. We do not want to fail to analyze properly any text that is being subjected to rigorous historical scrutiny. However, this text also has high poetic quality. It is a subject, therefore, not only for an historian's questions, but also for the deep reasons of poetry. We cannot escape the feeling, however, that praise of God by living things in the *Canticle* would have involved a choice, and would only have diluted and complicated its design and poetic intuition (whom to include? whom to exclude? why exalt whom?). Thus the overall harmony that clearly prevails in the *Canticle* would have been disrupted. The inclusion of living things within it would have raised the problem of beings both beautiful and ugly, of beings that turned out well or turned out poorly. The problem was one that Augustine had already discussed and resolved. The theologians of Francis' era were well-acquainted with the question, as, quite probably, Francis himself was; yet to insert living beings into the poem would have ruptured its lyric unity, insofar as it dwelt on the beauty of the cosmos and on

man, the being for whom it was created, the being who could appreciate it.

From what has been said so far, one can see how the *Canticle* could have had its (first) conclusion in the exaltation of nature as physical reality. With the inclusion of the stars and of natural forces—rather, the celestial spheres and the four elements, seen through the eyes of an artist and not of an astronomer—the poem could draw to an end.

The two concluding verses, linked to two actual events, will be examined when we review the final happenings of Francis' life.

The history of Italian religious poetry begins, then, with this canticle. It is not a composition that reflects complex and difficult theological concepts. Rather, its reference point is the world of the common people who seemed to draw the attention of heretics only. With simple confidence in his mission, Francis strove to win them back. The canticle thus serves as a specimen of poetry, of quiet combat against heresy, and especially as an approach to the popular mind. Further, the canticle is a sign of awareness and interest in the religious practice of the uneducated classes. The canticle's writer underscores the importance and worth of the religious world of the common people, with its singular forms and modes of representation. Among the historical merits of the saint of Assisi is his identification of this religious space, this area that apparently escaped the attention of the clergy, or at least was regarded as having little value. Had not Jacques de Vitry categorized Francis as being *simplex et illiteratus* [simple and unlettered] even though he was *Deo et hominibus dilectus* [beloved of God and men]? In this way—and he would not have been displeased had he known it—the founder of the Order of Friars Minor was regarded as being on the same level as the people to whom he directed his words of admonition, counsel, and exhortation to penance.

Thus, the *Canticle of Brother Sun*, without even taking into account its unquestioned poetic worth, serves as a singular example of its kind in its time and circumstances.

It is a work very deliberately intended for the world of popular piety, and one that speaks with a very loud voice.

At this point we can move on to an analysis of the *Canticle* as a manifestation of Francis' feeling for nature. At the outset we should shake off any incrustation of a romantic or even pre-Raphaelite character. Indeed, the *Canticle*—not by fault of its author—has had an infinite number of comments and commentators. With more-or-less fertile sentiment, they have attempted to find in it all sorts of echoes ranging from pantheistic mysticism to realism in art. Most often they fail to place it in its proper historical context. One exception to this trend is the thought of Henry Thode. His object of study was not Francis of Assisi but was the history of Italian art. He discerned a particular development in the thirteenth century when, according to him, the Renaissance began in Italy. He concluded from his study of Francis' personality and action that this development could be explained only by the presence and influence of a new and exceptional spiritual force. This force was surely single and individual; yet, through the foundation of the Order of Friars Minor, it succeeded in spreading itself into all classes and levels of a society that became transformed in its tastes and in its demand for works of art corresponding to those tastes. This is not the place to discuss the work and thesis of Thode, although in many respects it deserves more attention than is now normally paid to it. This is due to two nearly simultaneous occurrences. One was the publication of Sabatier's work, which is clearly better in its beauty of style and in its scholarly soundness. The other occurrence was the emergence of a new stylistic critique in the history of art, which tended to look upon the ties established by Thode and the conclusions he drew from them as being invalid. Nevertheless, a new vision of the natural world—Walter Goetz pointed this out in a famous article, as did many others—came to prevail. In some way, Franciscanism had played a part in this.

For the saint the universe, as a cosmic reality, was the result of God's all-powerful creative action. A further

point is that this nature was personified by Francis' way of speaking, although never confused with living reality. The sun is brother; the moon and the stars, like water, are sisters; fire and wind are brothers. Curiously, owing to a singular combination of a new feeling (that of the brotherhood of man with all creation) with an ancient feeling (that of mother-earth which erupts out of mythic remoteness into Francis' popular piety) earth is mother and sister all at the same time. The inanimate world is not, however, "fraternally" tied to man through any kind of confusion on a mystic level or through an essential vitalism that could lead to some sort of pantheistic equalization. Francis' language on this point is unmistakable both in the *Canticle* and in other episodes recounted to us by eyewitnesses such as the companions who attended Francis. They told of the respect he had for the realities of nature, especially for water and fire. Fire was especially dear to him, even to the point that he wanted it to extinguish naturally once it was ignited. One time his companions had all they could do to get him not to spread a flame that was burning his tunic. This did not at all mean, however, that he attributed magical powers of any kind beyond purely natural forces to natural elements. There is a specific psychological reason for this that fits perfectly into the saint's logic and mental framework.

We have pointed out more than once how Francis would have been averse, not to say hostile, to anything that went beyond the natural limits of things. This would conform to his intuitive, spontaneous will to adhere strictly to literal meaning and to the obvious worth of things, thus ruling out any allegorism or symbolism that would stretch beyond the concrete meaning of things. For him the sun is the sun, even if it offers a "sign" of God. The stars are the stars, the moon is the moon, and the same idea holds for the rest of the cosmos. If he calls them sisters or brothers, it is only for the purpose of pointing out that the sun or the moon or anything else was created by God himself in the same creative process as man. But

he goes no further. Thus, there is a web of unity within the cosmos as creation, but with clear distinctions among its various levels.

The same should be said for living things, for whom Francis had a tender regard and, at the same time, extraordinary respect. More than in the material reality of the universe, he felt in them God's creative action as well as his beauty and power. Through them he felt a respect for life not far removed or very different from that which he felt through man. We will not retell here the well-known anecdote about the wolf of Gubbio—a relatively late story—or about his preaching to the birds, which we have already mentioned, or his love for the ox and the ass who, according to a pious tradition, kept the newborn Jesus Christ warm in the manger, and his love for lambs. As far as can be determined, Francis had the same revulsion and the same extreme repugnance for blood as he did for money. This proceeded from his rejection of all physical violence and of all verbal polemics. There is no need to review how he crossed without harm the Saracen lines to speak with the sovereign, al-Kamil. Nor need we repeat that, neither in his works nor in the vast body of anecdotes about him, is there any episode in which he stoops to insults against anyone. In his writings he makes the point that it is necessary not to reproach someone who is behaving badly but, with understanding and sweetness, to lead him to change his life and do penance.

This vision of the universe through Francis' eyes comes across as globally positive. For him, the universe is charged with the creative action of God as goodness, as beauty, as light, and as life. At the center he indeed sees man, but in his duality as the highest instance of nature and, at the same time, as sinner, as the one that brought sin into the universe. This gives rise to the close bond that exists, beyond and after God's creative art, between original sin and the condemnation of man, on the one hand, and on the other, the Incarnation and redemptive coming of the Christ-God and his sacrifice on the

cross for the salvation of man.

The difficult problem of evil in Francis' concept of reality arises at this point. He was not so ingenuous or simple as not to see or consider evil in all its seriousness. His point of view, an interesting one, was that he felt that responsibility for evil lay not with the Devil—he regarded demons as *gastaldi*, as spies or "snitches" of the Lord, rather than as tempters in the classic and traditional sense of the term—but with man (he says not a word against Eve), as a human being who had disobeyed God, and in this act of pride and rebellion had fractured that order of creation. This rupture would have remained irreparable without God's sublime act of love when he sent his Son, Jesus Christ, to become man. His Incarnation, from the moment of his birth to his Crucifixion, Resurrection, and Ascension, with the continual participation of the Virgin Mary, his mother, did not restore the old order, since that was no longer possible. However, through the intervention and coming of Christ, a different and no less valid order was established. It was now on a higher plane since it was not physical and natural but was divine and supernatural, an order born from love, the love of God for his creatures.

On this new level of the restructuring of the universe, evil still exists, since the fracture of sin could not be eliminated. Yet when one knows how to understand sin, it can then be beaten and overcome by the love that Christ taught us and by the way of life that he demonstrated for us. This is a victory that demands man's commitment and dedication. Yet what burden are these when measured against the violation that man committed by disobeying God's command while man was living in the earthly paradise? Or when compared to Christ's life of suffering and humiliation, or to his death on the cross? Pain, suffering, and even death return in a dimension of love which became part of the world through Christ. Thus death is a sister for anyone living on this higher plane of goodness: "All praise be yours, my Lord, through Sister Death, from whose embrace no mortal can escape. Woe to those

who die in mortal sin! Happy those she finds doing your will! The second death can do no harm to them."

The center is Christ, the God-Man. This was not a new sentiment or awareness concerning the Incarnation, since the concept was very clear, well-stated and thoroughly present in theology throughout the entire medieval period prior to Francis. Yet it was not felt with the heart, as can be seen by the image of the crucified that Francis developed. Even though a more dramatic representation of the Crucifixion began to emerge in the iconography of the twelfth century, Christ was seen more as God conquering death, rather than, as Francis saw him, as a man racked by the torture of the cross and writhing in spasms of agony.

Francis, however, did not look upon the living Christ only at the peak moment of his sacrifice, but he saw him no less present in his existence as an outcast, in the humiliation of his birth in a stable. In responding to this sentiment about Christ's earthly reality, he attached great importance to the feast of the Nativity. He envisioned Christmas as having greater importance than it was accorded in the liturgy at the beginning of the thirteenth century and was led, as we shall see, to the "discovery" of the manger scene. By calling attention to the humanity of Christ at all the stages of his existence, Francis answered the heretical Catharist belief which denied that Christ was the Man-God, second Person of the Trinity, and made of him a mere angel. Most of them believed that he had but the appearance of a man and had been born of another angel, feminine in appearance, in a simulation of maternity. To these heretics he responded by speaking of Christ as the central reality of humanity redeemed by God's act of love.

Francis, then, countered Catharist pessimism with a joyful concept—and this is our final point here—of the joy of our existence for anyone who knew how to draw upon the divine meaning that pervades it. His joy, unvanquished even by his suffering and humiliation (as seen in the letter he dictated to Brother Leo), had its roots not in some superficial view of reality, but rather

in a dimension rich in precise and thoughtout coherence, but without any philosophical or theological ostentation. His concept of the world was of a brotherhood in God for humanity redeemed by Christ, a humanity that suffered like Christ but that also was glad like him with eternal hope. Yet this concept became real in Francis' own life in the form of hard and difficult confirmation: his physical pain, his resistance against any shaking of his ideal, and his death. These were now the few and increasingly burdensome years leading to the end of his life. Even in these last dramatic years, he knew how to be true to himself.

XI

Down from La Verna into Death

1 The stigmata

Despite many difficulties and obstacles, the institutional structures of what was already the Order of Friars Minor continued to advance in their development. Francis himself went on addressing anyone who wanted to listen to his words through the medium of his writings or through the example of his everyday living. Yet all the time his health deteriorated ever more seriously, despite the care tendered him by the people around him, and despite the best efforts of his physicians. In this regard we have observed that these medical measures, such as the cauterizations, had the result of worsening his physical state. His resistance to physical pain under these conditions appeared as nothing short of miraculous to those who were close to him.

In his desire to maintain, at whatever cost, his role as an example to all the friars, he did not make things easy for those attempting to care for him. One time, when he had to consume some soup for reasons of health, he wanted this gluttony of his to become public knowledge. He kept up his practice of a very strict asceticism, especially when he was conscious of yielding to some temptation. In this way Francis repeatedly showed that he understood in all its depth the Christian meaning of

existence, with its perpetual tension between good and evil. On the one hand, he was capable of grinding some food into the ground with his heel, if he saw it as leading him into gluttony. On the other hand, he was capable of enjoying even some cakes that a Roman lady, Jacopa de' Settesoli, made for him. She held him in deep devotion and affection. He took to calling her "Friar Jacopa," so as to justify the joy he found in her company. It also gave him a lighthearted excuse from his own frequent warnings to his confreres to avoid any familiarity with women that could create doubts and suspicions.

Under these circumstances it could not have been easy or comfortable to live with Francis. The companions who took care of him in his last years let this be known with sincere simplicity. They relate some enlightening episodes in this connection. The community, be it remembered, tended to live in small quarters, with a difficult life divided up between working or begging and the spiritual care of the faithful. In such a scene the presence of the saint and his companions, whenever and wherever they would arrive, must always have caused space and supply problems—to find room for four or five people and to feed them and care for them. Over and above these factors was the fact that one of these guests was gravely ill and was also the order's venerable founder.

It was only natural that the normal course of life would be disturbed under such circumstances. People came not only to see and hear him but also to snip pieces off his tunic, to touch him, and to stand around him as an extraordinary person, not without reason. However, they would also at times react badly when he requested something or insisted upon his points of view and his ideas. These reactions were sometimes unpleasant or even, in the words of his companions, "disturbing." It is instructive that Francis' reaction to this rudeness was not authoritarian but rather humble and resigned: he would withdraw to a church in order to recollect himself for a while in prayer. He would finally return to his brethren, serene once again. It is necessary to state here that

exaggerations or oversensitivity on the part of his companions have no bearing on his attitudes. They themselves provide us with another similar episode of unquestionable authenticity, straightforwardness, and intense humility. It deserves to be counted among the most well-known and beautiful of the *Little Flowers.*

The time was evening, and Francis asked the friar in charge of the community's provisions to go out to the garden and pick him some "petrosilli"—which could have been either parsley or wild fennel—so that he could flavor the bread he was about to eat. The friar objected that he had already gathered all that was available during the day and that there was now no more; besides, since it was not easy even in daylight to gather them, it was less easy at night. Therefore, it was useless to go out, especially since nothing could be seen in the dark. The saint insisted on it again, and received an even more irritated reply. Only after pleading for some time did the friar pay any attention. The friar finally went out to the garden and quickly succeeded in finding the desired "petrosilli." This story is given supernatural meaning and color by the companions who transmitted it, attributing the divine gift of prophecy to their father and founder. From an historical standpoint, we are interested in the very human yet sad evidence of subtle deterioration of feelings about Francis even on the part of those who should have held him most dear.

We stated earlier that the saint's true and great martyrdom consisted of his final years. They were made even more painfully tragic by the rude behavior and testy reactions of all the ones who came to look upon him as a burden, a precious and extraordinary one, but still a burden. In saying this, we do not want to suggest that Francis was always treated badly or that he was regarded with little respect or with lack of love. The intense and emotional memories of his companions prove just the contrary. We mean only to point out that he was not spared the bitter and painful awareness that he was somehow a burden. This must have struck deeply at

his acute sensitivity, made even more delicate and intense by his infirmities.

A sick and weary man, unspared by sadness, aware in his pain of the growing nearness of the suffering of Christ, could nonetheless, in the great complexity of the human heart, feel deep joy. This was so for Francis when, in the spring of 1224, with a very few companions (perhaps only those taking care of him, although the detail is passed over in silence), he withdrew for a period of eremitic living on Mount La Verna. Today it is a venerated place of pilgrimage, but then it was a splendid dense forest affording total solitude. It had been donated to Francis and the friars by the landowner. It was a prized retreat for total solitude and silence that permitted him to immerse himself in the wonder of nature created by God. It was there in September 1224, according to the traditional date, that he was overtaken by the greatest manifestation of the supernatural in his life: the stigmata.

We do not know, nor will we ever know, just what were Francis' personal reactions to the stigmata, nor how they came upon him nor exactly what they were. Possible interpretations, ranging from the most skeptical to the most supernatural are perforce nothing but hypotheses in the face of one fact: the saint maintained and imposed complete silence which, as we shall see later, he never lifted for the rest of his life. Even more remarkably, the companions who attended him daily, and thus certainly knew about them from the beginning in every detail, respected the saint's determination that they say nothing about the matter. From their memoirs and anecdotes nothing emerges that could aid us or lead us in some way to a better understanding of what the stigmata were. In the face of this total and well-kept silence, we conclude that we cannot and ought not go beyond establishing the reality of the stigmata. It is possible to attempt to explain it through the experience and study of all those who subsequently lived through some similar phenomenon. Yet this would merely mean attributing to Francis someone else's mystical experience. This would just not

help to interpret Francis' own experience of which we know nothing, except that it happened.

There is only one indisputable fact to be stressed at this point. Francis was the first person known to history to have received the five wounds. This means that the event of his stigmatization could not have proceeded from some current of imitation or repetition. It was an event original in and by itself and, as it were, spontaneous in its genesis. It is beyond doubt that the saint regarded it as a supernatural experience. The most valid proof of this, as far as we can tell, is the fact that he did not want anyone to talk about it then or ever. This attitude prompted, even in the Middle Ages, the suspicion that it was perhaps a matter of a *pia fraus* [pious fraud], i.e. of mystification for the purpose of edification. The one responsible for it is supposed to have been Brother Elias, vicar general at the time of the saint's death. His intent would have been to exalt the founder and to heighten the importance of the order. This would explain the silence of true and valid witnesses.

In contrast to this interpretation, it must be pointed out that this silence was kept by the witnesses even when there was no need for it, and even beyond all the posthumous honor that rendered Francis into an *alter Christus*. It seems that the silence served quite another purpose: it was the refusal to recount and broadcast an experience that was judged to be unique, unrepeatable, and personal by the one who lived it, i.e., by Francis himself. He therefore regarded it as being not appropriate for use as an example to others, and placed the event under a blanket of silence. After his death, it would also have been a matter of a protest by silence, without accusing anyone of malice, on the part of his companions against anyone who had revealed anything that was supposed to remain undisclosed forever. Brother Elias, who had great admiration for Francis and a passion for exalting him, may have been the object of such a protest.

It is our belief that silence on the matter was Francis' will, in keeping with his deep humility. The pain of the

passion of Christ that he had supernaturally felt in himself had to be an experience beyond communication; thus, it was pointless to try to talk about it. It is also pointless to make a futile effort to explain or imagine something that remains unknowable. There is another matter that deserves our attention now.

If we search through Francis' works and the numerous anecdotes about him in the latter stages of his life, nothing emerges as more important to him than Christ crucified and suffering. There is—or at least there appears to be nothing that indicates any shift in his feelings or in his personal devotion as regards the Lord's passion. This favors the conclusion—a very revealing one, in our judgment, that his meditation on the life of Jesus as worker, preacher, and crucified belongs to the deepest part of the saint's spirituality, as an essential component of his intimate religious experience.

His intense and lively personality, rich in expression of feeling, did not turn into that of an ascetic closed off to affections or to the bonds of memories, despite the unstoppable passage of years and the transformations that they brought. Examples of his enduring ties were found with Bishop Guido and Bernard of Quintavalle, mentioned earlier, as well as with Jacopa de' Settesoli. Mention must now be made of Brother Leo and Clare, since Clare received Francis' spoken and written words through Leo. We have Clare to thank for the fact that we possess two texts of particular importance for understanding Francis' mind in all its extraordinary and simple richness.

Brother Leo, one of the saint's first companions, was also one of those who attended and helped him in his final years. He loved his master and founder with dedication, respect, and a sense of truth. He loved him as well with a steadfastness that he maintained even during the order's later difficulties, which he witnessed before his death sometime after 1278. This steadfastness won him the greatest respect at all times. Without calling it favoritism, which would smack of unfairness, it can still

be said that he enjoyed with Francis a sharing of affection that was lively, spontaneous, immediate, and intense. The one-time head of the band of young men in Assisi, the first of the *ioculatores Domini* now limited his human contacts in keeping with the tighter circumstances of his life. Yet for that very reason he made his bonds even more intense and fulfilling.

Thomas of Celano, in his *Vita secunda,* recounts a story about Brother Leo based perhaps on one told by Leo himself. Leo was on Mt. La Verna, tormented by a temptation, yet lacking the nerve to tell Francis about it. However, the saint must have been aware of it, since he said to him, "Bring me some paper and ink, since I want to write down 'the Lord's words' and his 'Praises' that I have meditated upon in my heart." After writing the letter—it is a small parchment, about 10 x 14 cm (4 x 5.5 in.), still preserved in a reliquary in Assisi—he said to Leo, "Take this letter and keep it carefully until the day you die." Brother Leo faithfully obeyed. One side of this piece of parchment, folded in four, displays blurring of the writing owing to friction from contact with his habit. It thus proves that the letter did indeed remain close to the companion until his death. Beyond these external details—we should note that the letter is firmly dated by Leo himself, in the second half of September 1224, not long after the stigmata—it is more important to note with some emotion (even an historian has feelings) the saint's joyful state of mind. He answers the tempted friar not with curses and invocations against Satan and other devils, but with an exaltation of God and a blessing. Although God is exalted as Creator in the *Canticle of Brother Sun,* in this composition he appears as the convergent point of all goodness, whether of our surrounding reality or of the human spirit:

"You are holy, Lord, the only God,
and your deeds are wonderful.
You are strong. [This line is one of the few signs that this prayer was to serve as a shield against temptation.]
You are great.
You are the Most High,
You are almighty.
You, holy Father, are
King of heaven and earth.
You are Three and One,
Lord God, all good.
You are Good, all Good, supreme Good,
Lord God, living and true.
You are love,
You are wisdom.
You are humility,
You are endurance . . .
You are beauty.
You are gentleness.
You are our protector,
You are our guardian and defender.
You are courage.
You are our haven and our hope.
You are our faith,
Our great consolation,
You are our eternal life,
Great and wonderful Lord,
God almighty,
Merciful Savior."

This meditation by Francis has the pace of a litany as well as the pleading and commanding power of a magic formula. One may connect it, by reason of its obvious chronological proximity, to the *Canticle of Brother Sun.* The blessing on the back of the parchment has in its content an appeal not to magic but to the supernatural power of signs, especially the sign of the cross. Indeed, toward the bottom there is a scene of Calvary with a sign of the cross: Tau, the letter of the elect that reminds us by its form of the cross. Above this there is a biblical blessing (Num. 6:24-26) which is reinforced by the repetition of the formula of blessing appearing on the cross, using the words addressed to Brother Leo: "May God bless you, Brother Leo."

The most recent editors of this text have highlighted, in the Latin original (written in the saint's own hand), a series of noteworthy Italianisms. They greatly help us to confirm what has already been stated about Francis' cultural level, unaltered by the efforts of secretaries. No less significant is the tone of Francis' religious devotion. It is a product of his evangelical-biblical, rather than theological, outlook. More accurately, his outlook can be termed evangelical-liturgical in view of the echoes, rather than quotes, of the Gospels, the Pauline writings, and the Psalms that are found in his praise of God. Moreover, his style of litany in the "Praises" and the invocation of the blessing confirm a religious feeling that grasps the divine in its immediacy and regards it as functioning directly in our life, not through some theological meditation, but rather proceeding from the living reality of his feeling. God, then, is the positive power and the defense of man against every possible attack of evil and malice through temptation. Francis, out of his own experience, presents God to his beloved companion in the reality of his actual presence. It is God who defends his children and manifests or reifies himself in the sign of the cross-tau.

The aforesaid is confirmed on three levels: that of culture, that of the affections, and that of religious devotion, by another text addressed to the same Brother Leo. It is a letter Francis wrote to him while they were far from each other, yet only for a short while, judging from the letter's tone and its final request that Leo return. This rules out Sabatier's hypothesis that the letter was written around 1220-1221 while the two were in places distant from one another for a fairly long time. It makes more probable Walter Goetz' alternate supposition that dates the letter, as had Falloci-Pulignani, in the last period of Francis' life. It perhaps is worth pointing out here that the bonds of affection between the saint and his confreres became quite firm and trusting after Leo began serving as one of those caring for him toward the end of his life, as we learn from the letter that prefaces the *Legend of the Three Companions*.

Francis' Latin was trim, spare, and uncomplicated, and always replete with Italianisms that brought on obvious grammatical errors. Yet it also uttered in expressive language and fervent feeling a sense of brotherhood and deep understanding for another brother's soul that Francis perceived as not yet secure in that peace which he himself attained at the end. Thus, this letter enables us to grasp his feelings in depth, with their aura of subtly disturbed trepidation. He worried not over himself but over his confrere, and kept himself disposed and open to receive him and to face him anytime. This much we can infer, but it remains a mystery concerning what he was referring to here and what the two had discussed on their journey. These conversations were by no means useless. They had to serve a great purpose, since Francis, being separated from him for a short time, felt the need to repeat that he was ready to counsel him, and summed it up in a few brief words. Let Francis speak: "Brother Leo, your Brother Francis sends you greeting and peace. As a mother to her child, I speak to you, my son. In this one word, this one piece of advice, I want to sum up all that we said on our journey, and, in case hereafter you still find it necessary to come to me for advice, I want to say this to you: in whatever way you think you will best please our Lord God and follow in his footsteps and in poverty, take that way with the Lord God's blessing and my obedience. And if you find it necessary for your peace of soul or your own consolation and you want to come to me, Leo, then come."

At a time when there were no rapid means of personal communications, a letter could be the equivalent of our telephone call. This writing is intended to convey so much that, in its rapid brevity, it reveals its essential importance. In the first place, the exchange between Francis and Leo is de-dramatized. There was no conflict, just a conversation during a journey on how to best put into practice the ideal of life that all the friars proposed to live. This is discernible in the saint's note: it indicates not so much a change as it does a rethinking of his point of view. Whatever he judged to have been not quite accurate or to

the point in the conversation was now rectified. Anything that pleases God and allows a friar to follow in the Lord God's footsteps and his poverty is fine, "with my blessing and obedience." This could suffice, but not for the affectionate concern of Francis that moves him to write to Leo as a mother to a child. Thus, with a stroke of deep friendship and total availability, he concludes by saying that, if Leo feels the need to come to him for consolation, then by all means let him come.

This letter, like the one before it, shows us from one angle the intimacy of the bonds of affection between Leo and Francis. It also provides us with the most concise and also complete statement of his ideal. We also notice not an error, but rather an imprecise use of a word which eluded him in his haste to compose the letter: "anything that pleases *God* or allows a friar to follow *his* footsteps and *his* poverty." Two very similar, but still distinct, concepts are mingled here. The saint actually intended to say, "anything that pleases *God* and allows a friar to follow the footsteps and the poverty *of Christ*." From this we can conclude that he charges the friars with a double commitment in life: a general one, namely, to please God; and a specific one, to follow the footsteps and the poverty of Christ. These are few words, but they carry great meaning. They enable us to understand, as if we did not already, that to live *secundum formam sancti evangelii* [according to the way of the gospel] does not consist only of poverty, an economic condition pure and simple, but rather of following the steps, i.e., the overall example, of Christ, in making the definite choice as did Francis himself at the time of his conversion.

The following of Christ, however, is not something that can be captured in a formula or in some norm. Rather, it consists of a continual process of discovery in imitating the life of Christ and in approaching perfection. It is done not in selfish solitude but in a ceaseless stream of discussion and, when possible, emulation. In this process Francis offered himself as a mother to a child, as a counselor, as a friend standing by with open arms. Yet he

did not go beyond this since, wherever and whenever he believed the other person was right, he yielded without hesitation or condition. This attitude produced a form of religious piety that, as reflected in the two rules, was peculiarly and appropriately his own. It was not a piety closed off within a self-limiting and self-completing system, but rather was a process of coming closer to God or, more specifically, to Christ crucified. In this way, the old traditional division among clerics, religious, and laity became, if not juridically annulled or invalidated, then at least attenuated in the sharpness of its dividing lines, since all classes became reexamined not on their own terms, but on God's. The reality of this approach to God derives from this new point of view, from this different perspective, the perspective of God rather than of man. Francis accordingly responded by his personal example and the deeds of his brethren to a deep need in the popular piety of the masses. They were not interested in high positions of great responsibility nor in great theological doctrine. What they needed to see was positive action in following the footsteps and the poverty of Christ.

With everything seen in its relation to God, every gap between the faithful and the hierarchy, and the ecclesiastical sphere in general, closed. The measure of worth was no longer to be sought in externals or in merely juridical formalities. Now it was always to be found in connection with Christ but not just with his poverty.

One last point can be brought out that seems to have evaded the attention of scholars. This letter, humanly intense and spiritually beautiful, bears a resemblance in its logical structure and general outline to his letter to St. Anthony of Padua. Prescinding from the current of emotion found in the letter to Leo, their line of thinking is entirely identical: something is conceded on condition that something else regarded as essential might be upheld. This helps us to penetrate more deeply into the *condescensio*, the spirit of accommodation that we have already observed in Francis. In some ways it is hard to grasp the effects of this attitude. We will attempt to

explore its limits in order to understand better its entire value and meaning.

It seems that, for Francis, *condescendere* means to take into account the inescapability of certain ways of existing and living in the order and to accept their implicit consequences, as long as they never lead to the loss of the original ideal. In this vein, *condescensio* meant acceptance of the tonsure, which turned one from a layman into a cleric. Tonsure also obliged one to read, and whenever possible to sing, the divine office. However, in no way did this mean abandonment of the practical (not formally juridical) condition of an outcast, which he had chosen at the moment of his conversion. In no way did this choice conflict with the priestly state, for Sylvester and (probably) Peter Cattani were priests. *Condescensio* could also be perceived in the permission given to Anthony to "teach theology to the friars" on the condition that this would not diminish their "zeal for prayer and spirit of devotion." Finally, it was *condescensio* when he conceded some things to Brother Leo just as long as Leo would please God and emphasize the example and poverty of Christ.

The identical structure of the two letters appears important to us as a proof, as if it were necessary, of the authenticity of the letter to Anthony. It also displays Francis' sensitivity and intuition. Indeed, he had the capacity or, as the companions of his final years called it, the virtue and the divine gift to read people's hearts, especially those of his friars. Because of this, the level of expression of feeling is very different in the two letters. In the one to Anthony, the only personal note is the title "episcopus meus," a term—whether serious or affectionately joking—by which he wanted to honor the master of theology, in a new manner of speaking. In the letter to Brother Leo, however, Francis is a mother speaking to her child, since the matter in question stemmed not from a specific norm, but, as mentioned earlier, from a commitment to religious life in its essential features. The bonds of affection seem to have been more intense in these final

years, as is evident from the fact that the letters were safeguarded (it was only the material goods of Francis, the famed holy man, that were kept, not those of the young unknown penitent). Clare was included in these bonds, and one has the impression that their correspondence grew more voluminous. To her he addressed, as we shall see, an *ultima voluntas* [last will]. In its precise and nimble brevity (for many of the recommendations to the friars had no applications for Clare) it is the perfect equivalent of the *Testament.*

In the last years of his life there was a wellspring of interior richness that overflowed and made Francis' soul even more humanly alive and intense. It lifted him into an exceptional balance between human and superhuman; between ascetic strictness and flexible accommodation; between the saint who looked into eternity and the friend and brother who, in Christ and through Christ, recovered the deepest worth of earthly affections in the realm of the invisible. He felt able to show everyone this invisible reality through the level of the visible.

In this depth of soul that revealed itself completely, the episode of the recovery of the manger can be understood and interpreted. It was the Christmas custom that over the centuries saw the widest popularity. Only in our day does it seem to have receded somewhat. Prior to receiving the stigmata, yet after having suffered from several serious illnesses for some time, Francis went to Rieti seeking a cure for his eyes. He changed residence often in a quest for greater silence and solitude. Toward the end of 1223, according to a chronological note that is apparently valid even though provided by Thomas of Celano alone, Francis was at Greccio in a *castrum* or fortified compound as guest of the local lord, Giovanni by name. The saint approached him to say that he wanted to celebrate Christmas solemnly and needed the man's help toward this end.

At this point we need not reiterate the importance that Francis assigned to the humanity of Christ, or how this became one of the most interesting and noteworthy

aspects, although not the most original, of his concept of spirituality. A consequence was the great significance accorded to the feast of the Nativity. Beyond the message born out by the day's liturgy, it came to take on the meaning of the day in which Christ, God and man, saw the light of day for the first time and arrived among men to bring his message, starting with his own example of humility and poverty. This point is made, with much literary adornment, by Thomas of Celano in his *Vita prima*: "The brothers were called from their various places. Men and women of that neighborhood prepared with glad hearts, according to their means, candles and torches to light up that night that has lighted up all the days and years with its gleaming star. At length the saint of God came, and finding all things prepared, he saw it and was glad. The manger was prepared, the hay had been brought, the ox and ass were led in. There, simplicity was honored, poverty was exalted, humility was commended, and Greccio was made, as it were, a new Bethlehem. The night was lighted up like the day, and it delighted men and beasts." Mass then followed: in it, Francis, in liturgical vestments, read the gospel and then preached.

We will refrain from judging the extent of this account's authenticity and accuracy, since the biographer's sources remain unknown. However, it is worthwhile to examine what he says because, if we are correct, it reflects the saint's preaching technique, which should not become lost: "Then he preached to the people standing about, and he spoke charming words concerning the nativity of the poor king and the little town of Bethlehem. Frequently too, when he wished to call Christ *Jesus*, he would call him simply the Child of Bethlehem, aglow with overflowing love for him, his voice was more like the bleating of a sheep. His mouth was filled more with sweet affection than with words." After mentioning that someone had a vision in which the saint came up to an infant and wakened it, Thomas closes with an observation that is historically incisive: "This vision was not unfitting, for the Child Jesus had been forgotten in the hearts of many;

but, by the working of his grace, he was brought to life again through his servant St. Francis and stamped upon their fervent memory."

In fact, the revival or, as it was called, the "invention" of a representation of the birth of Jesus Christ, related to the overall rediscovery of the humanity of Christ, especially of his suffering on the cross and of his life among men. By itself, the Nativity scene gained great importance in the Christian liturgy, especially in the West. In our opinion, it was something that came to Francis not out of some theological reflection or biblical-scriptural meditation, but out of deep religious feeling and courageous good sense. Without any hesitation he brushed aside any interpretive or allegorical tendencies that for a long time had neglected, not the dogma of the Incarnation, but surely its real and practical meaning. It was Francis who rediscovered the humanity of Christ in the literal sense. Thus the crucifix became—and should have become—no longer the representation of a being who was truly human yet still, at least apparently, was also above and insensitive to the pain that the horrible torture was inflicting. Instead, now it was a true body, tormented and disfigured by its spasms. A Jesus who had not humanly suffered on the cross could engender reverent and devout respect, but not grateful love. Anyone who saw in the Nativity only the rejoicing of the angels and the adoration of the shepherds and of the magi would end up forgetting the humiliation of him who was refused lodging in the inns, the poverty of his refuge in a stable, and the manger in place of a crib.

There was no change effected in the dogma's formulation. Yet, from the perspective of religious sentiment, and then of devotion and worship, there was a genuine upheaval concerning the reality of Jesus. Surely he was God as always, but he was also *man* from his birth to his death, in all reality, and not just in a theological pronouncement.

There is more in the Nativity scene as Francis thought it up and spread it around to others. He himself had seen

and felt Jesus the poor man in his public life with his apostles and tortured upon the cross. He had followed that example, and, toward the end of his life, he saw that it would be good for those with him to understand an important reality. He wanted them to see how, at the very moment of his entrance into the world, Christ had begun to give an example of humility, poverty, and marginalization. Not only was his birth as man a living example of humiliation, but the moment of his birth in a stable, turned away by all from social belonging, was a humiliation within a humiliation. In the manger Francis found the ultimate confirmation and the conclusive affirmation of his intention to pass over to the midst of those among whom Christ desired to be the first. It was a way to assert his scale of values in order that they could not be altered or put into question. The manger of Greccio, then, cannot be reduced to a gesture or to an idea of popular inspiration and enclosed within the class of common people. Instead, it was the ultimate external display, as well as the most impressive, of the humanization (if the term is appropriate) of Jesus Christ, the God-Man. It is plain, after all that has been said, that a silent and implicit polemic was being waged through this medium against Catharism.In any event, the important reality is that the emphasis did not fall on its antiheretical posture,but rather on its authentic, deep religious value: the approach of Christ to man, that man might better avail himself of Christ and follow him.

Some months later, the stigmata occurred. Between the manger and the passion was a life which Francis exemplified in two distinct supernatural experiences. These Christic experiences of the saint began in total interiority and later developed their external expressions. From the manger to the stigmata, through the numberless instances of his own sufferings, humiliation, and poverty, the exterior manifestations of his inner experiences, communicated or communicable (*not* including the stigmata), served to instruct others that they might follow and imitate him. The best-known and most persuasive validity of his own example derives from the central point of his

Christic experience, particularly in his final years, as the sources seem to tell us. More than by his words, Jesus Christ teaches us by his example. The words are but the clarification, the justification, the possibility of communication with others, that they might better understand and act.

Between Greccio and La Verna, Francis truly replicated in himself the experience of Christ, both the sweet and the horrible. He had grasped in its depth the essence of love. This is proven in the letters of which we spoke, and proven also in his life as it drew to its end.

2 *Return to Assisi*

From one place to another the saint was moved, in the hope that physicians would succeed at least in slightly alleviating his sufferings, if not in curing him. In reality, however, his condition grew steadily worse. The progressive nature of the illness, quartan fever, became all the more evident owing to Francis' weakened state, in a fatal process of combined cause and effect. Nor could anything more be done for the trachomatous conjunctivitis that had already caused nearly complete blindness, accompanied by pain that made it seem as if his eyes were being pierced by thorns. It is hard to imagine a more agonizing complex of pains. Those around him must have noticed what he was suffering, whether they assisted and followed him out of duty or affection. These included Brother Elias, the vicar general, Ugolino of Ostia, the protector of the order, and the four who stayed with him all the time after the illnesses, especially the blindness, deprived Francis of any possibility of taking care of himself. These people are important to this history, since the most vivid and direct accounts of the end of the saint's life come from them or at least some of them. In his two biographies, Thomas of Celano withholds their names out of respect for their humility. He speaks of them in glowing but anonymous terms. Still, they are identifiable: Brother Angelo Tancredi, Brother Leo,

Brother Rufino, and Brother John of Lodi, the strongest and most robust of the four.

From everything that these individuals said and did, it becomes clear that Francis, in addition to the uninterrupted pain, was also steadily weakening. One sign of this debility is the fact that his journeys, or rather his transfers, became gradually shorter and included an obligatory stop at St. Mary of the Portiuncula, a place he frequented gladly. He did not abandon, however, his efforts at giving good example. A brief, but instructive witness of this is found in a chapter of Thomas' *Vita prima.* It shows Francis' distress as the order was changing, since he always felt that it must rediscover its essential inspiring motive. "Therefore he was afire," wrote Thomas, in a passage worth quoting, since it states briefly several aspects of his suffering, confirmed by many points of evidence, "with a very great desire to return to the first beginnings of humility and, by reason of the immensity of his love, he thought to recall his body to its former subjection, even though it had already come to such an extremity. He removed from himself completely the obstacles of all cares, and he fully silenced the clamorings of all anxieties. Though he found it necessary to moderate his early rigor because of his infirmity, he would still say, 'Let us begin, brothers, to serve the Lord God, for up to now we have made little or no progress.' He did not consider that he had laid hold of his goal as yet, and persevering untiringly in his purpose of attaining holy newness of life, he hoped always to make a beginning. He wished to go back again to serving lepers, to be held in contempt, as he once had been. He purposed to shun companionship with men and to retire to the most remote places, so that, having thus put off all cares and laid aside all solicitude for others, only the wall of flesh would stand between him and God.

"For he saw many pursuing offices of authority; and despising their rashness, he sought to recall them from this pestilence by his example. He used to say that it was a good and acceptable thing before God to exercise the

care of others and that it was becoming that they should undertake the care of souls who would seek in it nothing of themselves but who would attend always to the divine will in all things. Those, namely, who would put nothing ahead of their own salvation and who would pay no heed to the applause of their subjects but only to their advancement; who would seek not display before men but glory before God; who do not strive after a prelacy but who fear it; who are not puffed up by such a thing when they have it but are humbled, and who are not dejected when it is taken away but are filled with joy."

These lines, written a short time after the saint's death and canonization, are no doubt the immediate echo of Francis' final anxieties concerning the friars. They tell us about everything already said about his worries, and his efforts to avert from the order he founded the nearly fatal decadence that he had noticed in all the orders that had preceded his. We need not tarry on the balanced solution that the saint, with all his good example, found between the *norms* of the rule and the *dedication* of someone who desired always to advance on the way of perfection in the service of his brethren. This balance made it necessary to devise a whole series of accommodations, both theoretical and practical, that would succeed in preserving, in the framework of respect and obedience for the *norm* established by the rule, the *dedication* toward an ever higher holiness. It was this holiness that called for following "the footsteps and poverty of Christ."

On the level that we have called "theoretical" (obviously stretching the term), we can identify especially the *Testament,* along with some other directive documents, as well as the "Last Will" addressed to Clare.

The *Testament,* often mentioned in this book, is a document that was altogether unparalleled in its time. In many respects it resembles what is now called a spiritual testament, but was something very unusual in the first decades of the thirteenth century. Francis himself, in handing it to his brethren, found it necessary to instruct them clearly: "The friars should not say, 'This is another rule';

for this is a reminder, admonition, exhortation, and my testament, which I, Brother Francis, worthless as I am, leave to you, my brothers, that we may better observe the rule we have promised to the Lord."

In this way he made the meaning of the document unmistakably clear. It was later in Franciscan history that vehement conflicts developed over its juridical quality, its degree of obligation, and its practical meaning. And yet, on the basis of what we have seen, the importance, range, and meaning of the *Testament* are clear enough. It is not, nor is it intended to be, another normative text, or another series of prescriptions. However, it also does not conceal its intention to serve as a written aid toward better observance of the rule, not by providing interpretation, but by giving a *reminder* of Francis, as his *admonition* and *exhortation.* They are three well-chosen words, appropriately included in the document, in purposeful and carefully arranged order. In the first place, it is a reminder, recalling Francis' *conversio,* his conversion, and his *conversatio,* his way of living, just as it was at the beginning and in the early times of the order. He is like a model, a touchstone, with which the friars were to compare themselves continually and to see how near or far they were from their founder's ideal. It is easily understandable that this is a precious piece in the reconstruction of the saint's biography. Yet precisely because it has already served as an historical source, we should not lose sight of its function of showing what one man, Francis, does with himself and his purpose in life. Others could leave to their heirs riches and wealth. He himself had nothing and had forsaken everything to enter into the midst of those whom society rejected, just as Christ had been rejected by being born in a stable and laid in a manger. Francis had something to leave that he had built with a thousand renunciations, sacrifices, and sufferings: his own example, the example of a friar for the other friars, but not out of purely human experience. It is remarkable that he made not the least mention of his physical sufferings, for these were bound to the will of God who could

send them or not as tests. Moved by this example, the Friar Minor chooses the life that Francis had chosen in his conversion. The friar is to follow it if he truly wishes to be part of the *fraternitas* gathered around the saint.

In this way the rule, even with its unavoidable juridical aspect, was anchored in a living example and experience that lent it energy to animate his followers and make them fruitful, particularly through counsel and exhortation. A more complex—but perhaps not more difficult—task is to rediscover the parallel admonition that unfolds from the remembrance of the saint. The task was at hand at the beginning, when Francis, standing between the past and the present, appealed for respect and devotion toward priests. His statement became clearer as he moved from his remembrance of the life of the early friars to the present. He then spoke of work, of the poverty of their abodes, of the mental attitude that they were to hold, of the prohibition from seeking privileges from the Roman curia for whatever reason. Admonition gradually shifted over to exhortation, leaving the part about his reminder completely behind. It all culminated in his final and, we think, definitive exhortation, supported by all the foregoing admonition and remembrance. His exhortation in favor of the immutability of the rule and the *Testament,* was Francis' way of guaranteeing the permanence and fidelity of the order. "The minister general and all the other ministers and custodes are bound in virtue of obedience not to add anything to these words or subtract from them. They should always have this writing with them as well as the rule and at the chapters they hold, when the rule is read, they should read these words also:

> "In virtue of obedience, I strictly forbid any of my friars, clerics or lay brothers, to interpret the rule or these words, saying, 'This is what they mean.' God inspired me to write the rule and these words plainly and simply, and so you too must understand them plainly and simply, and live by them, doing good to the last."

In reality, it was this point that Francis considered to be the major feature of his exhortation. For it, he employed the strongest expression of command that he knew: *Precipio firmiter per obedientiam.* Yet soon it was precisely his mandate to command that was challenged and then *de facto* eliminated by challenging its juridical validity. Indeed, it is clear from the text that these factors had never entered into his mind nor did he provide for them. For the *Testament* was purposely a legacy of his life example, a painful and thoughtful farewell from a father to his children. He even greeted them in the document and blessed them:

> "And may whoever observes all this be filled in heaven with the blessing of the most high Father, and on earth with that of his beloved Son, together with the Holy Spirit, the Comforter, and all the powers of heaven and all the saints. And I, Brother Francis, your poor worthless servant, add my share internally and externally to that most holy blessing."

This concluding passage is highlighted here, because it spells out Francis' normal state of mind in his final years, the same as was mentioned with regard to his affectivity, ever more lively and intense. As death approached, he felt neither fear nor anxiety over the separation, nor was he preoccupied over the abandonment of anything—even of the places that he loved beginning with Assisi and his beautiful Spoletan valley. Nor did he suffer over leaving his companions, his brethren, Clare, the sisters, or the beloved Jacopa de' Settesoli. Yet he felt a deep need to repeat to all of them his affection and blessing. This was his outreach toward others, toward his loved ones, toward the ones closest to him as well as to all his brethren, even the most distant and most unknown ones. He thus manifested outwardly his love, in the highest and most intense meaning of the term. He achieved, or rather strove to achieve, the total breadth of the love of Christ while conforming to human gradations; not even Jesus himself,

insofar as he was a human being with human feelings, exempted himself from such gradations. At this supreme moment of balance between the temporal and the eternal, Francis expressed the best of himself as completely as possible.

Witness to this is the *Ultima voluntas s. Clare scripta,* the last will written to St. Clare. In her steadfast desire to remain loyal to the father, master, and founder, she introduced the document—perhaps not without a polemical intention relating to what the friars had done with the *Testament*—into the rule itself, where it came to be accepted as an integral part, prefaced by these words: "And that we and those who were to come after us might never fall away from the highest poverty which we had chosen, shortly before his death he again wrote to us his last will: 'I, little Brother Francis, wish to live according to the life and poverty of our most high Lord Jesus Christ and his most holy Mother and to persevere in this to the last. And I beseech you, my Ladies, and I exhort you to live always in this most holy life and poverty. Keep close watch over yourselves so that you never abandon it through the teaching or advice of anyone."

The concise structure of this *Ultima voluntas,* despite its brevity, renders it into a reminder, an admonition, and an exhortation, directed toward Clare and her sisters in religion. He had no need to repeat to her either his conversion experience or his early way of life. The secret conversations between Francis and Clare, prior to her flight from home, must have been very fresh in her memory, for she indeed had forsaken everything that life seemed to offer her, in order to follow Francis and Christ. It was enough for him to state that he was "little Brother Francis," whose main purpose was "to follow the life and poverty of Christ." This is the expression found in the letter to Brother Leo and elsewhere. In it, he makes no dissociation of life from poverty, since the letter is but the tangible exterior manifestation of the former. This is the simplest and most pregnant synthesis of his ideal. He stresses it insistently; one could even say that the

more he senses it to be in danger, the more tenacious is the obstinacy with which he upholds it. His life and his purpose in life coincide to the point that they no longer are distinguishable from one another. His counsel and admonishment are that the "poor ladies" do the same. He does not make Clare personally liable for this compliance; yet the fact that he does not make her responsible is not so much a disregard for hierarchical structure in their community as it is a sign of complete trust that required nothing more specific or particular. However, the last part of the document, in which he exhorts them to beware of anyone who in any way could lead them astray from their chosen path in life, demonstrates how the dying Francis was in anguish over the future of his order and over the perils that menaced it. It is worth remarking that, in this document, as in the *Testament*, the saint was prohibiting any glossing over or commenting on the rule and the *Testament*. The latter was intended for and addressed to all the friars; it was an act that was meant to have—and this was indeed Francis' intention—the widest distribution so as to curtail and block any change as far as possible. On that account, the *Testament* had to conserve the tone and character of a directive from a higher level. It could not take on a tone of friendly intimacy, although it still manifested Francis' universally benevolent affection.

Toward Clare and her sisters, the exhortation and admonition could be expressed without cautious reserve since the *Ultima voluntas* was, without doubt, only one of several spiritual letters by means of which Francis followed and accompanied their religious life. Another example of this was his note concerning fasting. Only later, when the rule of the Poor Clares was drafted, did the faithful daughter insert Francis' letter into it. Her clear intention in so using it was to avoid papal intervention that, as was well known, tended to modify the form of governance and of poverty of Clare and her sisters. At that time it was several years after Francis had been declared a saint and was famous for miracles and wonders. In popular opinion he was considered to be a "second

Christ" providentially destined to save the Church. Any letter from him with that explicit final protest was truly a formidable weapon even against a pope, including a great jurist like Innocent IV.

This letter and the others—certainly, at least one more was written thereafter—show how Francis remained bound to Clare, and the steadfast attention that he paid to her religious life and activity. They show as well the deep bond of affection forged at the time of the noble girl's conversion. It was a bond that never changed but rather became richer than ever with an admiration that was deeper and more intense, the more the saint's greatness became evident to her. She indeed was one who had believed in him from the time he was a youth whom many judged to be lost in folly.

Francis' concern was to assure the permanence and structure of the order as he had thought them out in a balance between *norm* and *dedication beyond* the norm, by the attractive power of example. Against the background of his concern we can understand more deeply the motive for other provisions which like the *Testament*, were indeed not a new rule, but served as means to put it better into practice. They are a group of texts which elsewhere we have called the "testaments" of Francis. They offer a series of specific indications that mean to make evident his particular wishes.

One of these statements concerns the residences of the friars. His distrust, if not to say his direct hostility, toward fixed residences under their ownership, did not become manifest as a moment of bad humor only at Bologna, when it became necessary for the cardinal protector Ugolino to intervene. Nor was it confined to the incident at the Portiuncula when he had the house torn down that the Assisians were in progress of building for the friars. His attitude endured up to the vigil before his death, when he repeated once again that their houses were to be made of mud, stones, and tree branches. Nor is Francis' tenaciousness to be reduced to a sick man's stubbornness. His will was rooted in his concept of the order, which he

never changed and from which he never departed. Since the friars were to be on the same level as outcasts, lepers, beggars, or at most as poor day-laborers, how could they, without lapsing into flagrant self-contradiction, live in walled-in houses, sheltered from the elements or from hardships of cold, heat, and life in the open air? Once again the apparent strangeness of Francis springs from the firm coherence and clarity of his thought.

Even more important were his instructions regarding the Portiuncula, with a clear and specific purpose. The Portiuncula was not only to be always the center which the friars could regard as the place where their movement had begun its existence and activity. In the bosom of the order, it was to perform an essential directive function, outlined precisely in Francis' intentions and plans: it was to be the exemplary community, the model monastery, the measure to which all the others would compare themselves. The minister general was to bring the best friars together there. By this he did not mean the best educated, the wisest, or the most renowned, but those who were outstanding for their silent and humble holiness of life, for strict asceticism, for love of obedience, for deep respect for the rule. When one of these friars died, he was to be replaced by another of equal spiritual commitment. Brotherly love was to rule in this monastery, along with the most complete poverty and silence. To be excluded were discord, vain chatter, roaming about and useless visiting. It was necessary, then, that the spirit prevail that had moved the first group which, with Francis, had taken up residence there. Their purpose was to perpetuate their tradition and to show it to be alive and well to those who would come later over the course of time.

In this manner the saint did not seek to staunch the flow of reality with strict norms or rigid provisions, rather, he directed his efforts toward putting into practice, and passing on to others, the kind of life that he had always sought. In this way it would forever serve as an example to others. Once again it was a matter not of juridical decisions but of specific life situations: the *individual*

purpose at the Portiuncula had to expand and express itself in a *communitarian* purpose, in order to serve not just individuals but all of the friars.

Slowly but surely we see Francis' final plan unfolding, with ever clearer purpose, for salvaging his original ideal for the order that he had created. He had never set in opposition, but rather had coordinated, *norm* and *dedication*, the *rule* as a set of juridical directives and the practice of the *rule* as a form of religious life that strove always to advance by following the living, appealing, and genuine example of Christ. Now he saw the need to put this coordination on a structured and functional basis, so that it could continue to work beyond Francis' physical presence and existence. He realized how much his ideal was bound up with his person. He was also aware that it was conditioned by several factors, some of which were negative but which he managed to hold in check by the force of his personality. Yet once he was gone, these negatives would take on greater and more influential power. This led him to conclude that it was necessary to form nuclei of resistance and good example. These had to perdure and arrest all danger of decadence, as far as possible. We will see that the saint dedicated all his energies and the greatest commitment to this plan, as much as his intelligence and powers were able.

3 Francis at Assisi. The Canticle of Brother Sun: the two final verses

In point of fact, Francis' energies were diminishing more and more. In these final months there was one last, futile recourse to a Sienese physician. He was then transported to Assisi and given lodging in the palace of Bishop Guido, the same Guido who had wrapped him in his mantle years before. Guido had followed—we know not with what feelings—the impressive rise of Pietro Bernardone's young son toward the heights of holiness. There are clues, especially from the saint's final years, that he too was captivated by Francis' charm and that his affection and devotion toward him was greater than ever, whence

his hospitality toward the saint. We understand, nonetheless, how Francis remained uncomfortable. No, he did not endure diabolical temptations of the kind that had tormented him in Rome while at the house of the cardinal Leo Brancaleone; nor did he set about begging alms before sitting down at the table, as he had done, again at Rome, while staying with the cardinal protector Ugolino of Osita. Now, however, he proceeded in as simple and direct a way as possible to provide for the order through the *Testament* and the testaments, and through letters and notes, as well as gathering his most beloved people around him. As it had been throughout his life, his first and greatest level of reality was the bond of affection with his brethren in the *sequela Christi*, inspired always by love.

If we were to characterize these final months of Francis' life, we would have to feature the intense richness of all his feeling directed toward others, with impressive drive and a need for response that stemmed only from an inexhaustible well of affection. The fragile *Franciscus parvulus*, as he called himself out of both humility and a regard for his reduced state, was overflowing with love as his supreme gift, as the finest good to give to all whom he loved. He received love back and felt the need, as always, to have around himself the people dear to him. Although—we must repeat it again—his biological existence and his physical reality have already been considered as a long, uninterrupted, subtle martyrdom, his soul still brimmed over with affection. Because of this, he did not seem to notice with any worry the imminence of his death. For him, even death was a part of the natural and providential order of creation as willed by the love of God. Death could cause him no more fear than the rising or the setting of the sun, the moon, or the stars. It is quite natural that the *Canticle of Brother Sun* could have been produced in this state of mind. It emerged spontaneously in Italian, breaking existing molds of expression, resonating with all the sincerity with which it came from his heart, having the simple truthfulness of an everyday event. Thus it is not futile, but irrelevant, to try to

determine in which location it was written, especially if we conclude from the evidence we have pondered that it was authored in three stages, even granting its aesthetic and inspirational unity. There is no need to belabor the point beyond stating that the *Canticle* was not inspired by this or that place, but flowed out of Francis' state of mind, out of his joy. Among all the feelings that abounded in his soul, it seems that this joy was dominant along with love. From his song to that of the birds, it seemed as if the universe were one immense joyous choir, from which evil, suffering, and death were banished. The ultimate marginalization, considered by others to be the most dreadful, the one "from which no living person can escape," in which the supreme leveling overtakes all things, could no longer touch him. It yielded, as it should, to his love and joy for creation, the expression of God's love; to his love for men, for whose sake Christ chose to become like them and to accept the condition of poverty and abandonment even to death on a cross; to his love for those who were close to him, who had understood him, comforted, aided, and consoled him, who had sustained him not by crowding around him after his victories, but by joining him when everyone else looked upon him as defeated and mad, as someone to mock.

This is the key to comprehending Francis' final times, actions, words, and writings. Among other things the incident stands out when Francis intervened in Assisi from the Portiuncula in a quarrel between his Bishop Guido and the podestà, Oportulo, which we mentioned earlier. We do not know the reasons behind the conflict. They were probably not unusual, but more than likely proceeded from some dispute over prestige or over conflicts of competence and jurisdictions, which abound in the chronicles of Italian cities. The two men escalated the dispute quickly to the most serious sanctions against one another. The podestà was excommunicated by the bishop, and the bishop was banished from the city and forbidden access to the marketplace. Since the one relied on his guards, at his command for keeping public order, and the

other on all of his spiritual power, formidable even without force of arms, no one dared to come between them. Upon seeing that peace was being destroyed in his beloved Assisi, Francis' pain was deep. "It is a disgrace," he remarked to the friars caring for him, who preserved a record of his words and actions, "that no one is acting as a mediator between the two in order to reconcile them." He then composed—the situation is highly credible, since it well matches the saint's creativity in "devising" whatever a given occasion required—the verse of the *Canticle* that speaks of peace. He then dispatched two friars in his name and on his authority to sing it for the podestà, and two others to do the same for the bishop. According to eyewitnesses, the result of his initiative was overwhelming. Moved by the fact that Francis was striving to reconcile them, the two met on the Piazza del Comune and reciprocally pardoned one another. Each one acknowledged whatever was his own fault and committed himself to peace and concord. Once again, a victory for love.

In moving from the bishop's palace to the Portiuncula, Francis was not able to see Clare. The sick "poor lady" did not see alive again the man who had given her a meaning and pointed out to her a goal valid for her entire life. Along the road there was one more act of love: he gave his blessing to his Assisi.

His death approached ever more closely. For some time, according to a remark in Thomas of Celano's *Vita prima*, his belly had been swollen by what the physicians of his day called dropsy; and his legs, too, were painfully swollen. Yet the rest of his body was emaciated to the point that there seemed to be no flesh, only skin clinging to bone. His long martyrdom was coming to its end, and the saint was fully aware of it. He now wanted to conclude his Canticle with the final verse. In its complex and intense structure, in its bond between human time and divine eternity, between salvation and damnation, the hymn to creation as the supreme good and as the expression of God concludes in a perfect way.

Death, Francis tells us, is the natural conclusion to life:

from it no living person can escape. It is good because it is willed by God. It is in the free will of man himself that the possibility of evil emerges: man can choose between "the most holy will" of God and his own rebellious free will. Happy is the one who knows how to abandon himself to the Creator's provident kindness: he need not fear the "second death," eternal damnation. Damnation is truly terrible, but Francis, filled with love, does not speak of judgment, does not point to the flames of hell, and does not want to arouse fear. All of this is summed up in one term, namely, the "second death." The end that so many people fear should not be a source of terror, if one keeps in mind the *via universae carnis* [the way of all flesh], the end of human physical existence. The only fearful end is the "second death," the damnation that excludes us from the love of God. Here for the first time, unless we are mistaken, among everything that we have from Francis, we find something between admonishment and threat in one way and brotherly and loving exhortation in another: "Woe to those who die in mortal sin." After these words of somber warning, he draws a sharp contrast by pointing out the ultimate happiness and ultimate praise of God for all who die in grace resigned to his will.

Thus did Francis prepare to die, and with the care and affection of loved ones, we would like to know something about his end. However, his later elevation to sainthood and the importance of many of his deeds have sometimes altered the accounts of his dying, sometimes falsified them, and sometimes laced them with legends.

One of the accounts that is certain involves an incident that is humanly exquisite and bittersweet in its simplicity. Francis wrote to Jacopa de' Settesoli, the Roman lady who had lavished kindnesses upon him, asking her to hasten to his side: "I want you to know, my dear, that the blessed Christ through his grace has revealed to me that the end of my life is near. If you want to see me alive, then, as soon as you finish reading this letter, make haste and come to St. Mary of the Angels. If you do not come within a few days, you may not find me alive. Bring with you a coarse

cloth for covering my body, and wax for my burial. I also ask that you bring me some of the sweetmeat that you used to give me while I was sick in Rome."

Concerning this letter, some doubts have been raised as to some particulars in this version. However, one may at least remark the supreme serenity with which Francis speaks of his imminent death. He also makes a tranquil request for cloth to serve as a shroud for his body. He even asks for the delicacies that remind him of the lady's solicitous and affectionate care that surrounded him at an earlier time.

It is fair to point out, as was recently done, that Francis conducted himself unconventionally when compared to any hagiographic pattern. Yet it is worth pointing out both the spiritual heights to which he had risen and, at the same time, his enduring deep humanity. There is no contradiction here, only a perfect rapport based on a balanced set of values: his dead body would be covered with sackcloth, but while alive, he would still have the comfort of something nice.

While Jacopa was en route—the note has been dated between September 28 and October 1—Francis wanted the friars to gather around him in prayer. It was to bless them and to carry out before them his last act that would crown his efforts for the holiness and unity of the order. Unfortunately, the sources have seriously compromised the value of this deed and the commitment that flowed from it, since they attempted to change its essential meaning. We refer to the saint's last blessing given to his first confrere, Bernard of Quintavalle, and his reliance upon the ministers to love Bernard as if he were Francis himself.

It must be stated frankly that Thomas of Celano in the first *Vita* alters the truth. According to him, Francis blessed, with the friars, only Brother Elias, then minister general, powerful and still close to Pope Gregory IX, who had commissioned that biography. In the *Vita secunda*, Elias is not mentioned. Thomas corrected what he wrote, but without naming anyone else. Bonaventure does the same. Thus the official biographies were silent, Thomas on

purpose, and Bonaventure out of ignorance, for he stayed close to and even depended upon Thomas' text. It is important to note that the episode appears in all the unofficial sources, although with its meaning not fully grasped. Yet they contain an authentic text dictated to a secretary and intended for wide distribution. For the sequence of facts, we are following the *Compilatio assisiensis/Legenda perusina*, which seems to be the oldest and, in many respects, the most trustworthy.

Lady Jacopa had arrived, bringing what Francis had requested, particularly a sweet delicacy that he liked very much. The saint immediately called for Brother Bernard so that he might also have a taste. He came and took a place with the other friars around their father and master. He then asked for the saint's blessing: "If you manifest your affection to me with a fatherly tenderness, I believe that the others will love me more for it." Francis wanted to satisfy him and raised his hand to touch his head, but touched instead that of Brother Elias standing nearby. He realized his mistake and, with Bernard closer, placed his hand on his head and blessed him. Then he summoned another friar and told him to write down the words that, with few textual variations, have come down unchanged to us. Its regard for detail leads us right away to accept its authenticity without question. It reads: "Brother Bernard was the first brother the Lord gave me. He was the first one who put into practice and fulfilled the perfection of the gospel to the letter by distributing all his goods to the poor. For that and for many other merits, I am obliged to love him more than any other brother of the order. I therefore wish and order, to the extent that lies in my power, that the minister general, whoever he is, cherish him and honor him as myself, that the ministers provincial and the brothers of the whole order look upon him as taking my place."

The meaning of this blessing and text became obscured with time, even in the sources. The sources dutifully transmitted the text but somehow lost its meaning, and gave the matter no further regard. Thus, the accounts in

the sources do not completely reflect the actual event. However, the meaning of it all re-emerges clearly and precisely despite the official silence and omissions, once the blessing and the text are placed in the historical context within which they unfolded.

It must first be remembered that Francis greatly feared the decadence of the order's original spirit. He also had made great efforts to keep the spirit alive by the force of his own example in plain view of others, and also by encouraging good example on the part of others as often as possible. He feared that his death could foster change for the worse, from his perspective. Proof of this fear is the series of admonitions and measures that he tried to put into action before he would die. The *Testament,* along with the directives concerning the houses and the life of the friars, particularly of the Portiuncula, outlined the stages and the specific measures for achieving his consistent desire: he was seeking to create obstacles against decadence and to establish living, functioning structures that would sustain and direct human weakness and fragility. It must have caused him special concern that the *Testament* would not have the attractive power of living example before people's eyes. This generated Francis' last and extraordinary "invention," namely, that of creating a "continuator" of himself, to function as a new version of himself at the side of the order's hierarchy, beginning with the minister general and reaching to all the friars: this he designated in Brother Bernard.

The choice, beyond doubt, was wise and appropriate, given Bernard's widespread good name. He could displease no one, since he was chosen on an indisputable basis: he was Francis' first companion. He was the one who, in a certain sense—which could not be overlooked—had sacrificed everything, even more than Francis himself. The young merchant had renounced whatever he had as the son of Peter Bernardone and whatever his inheritance would have been. Brother Bernard, very wealthy, had renounced all his possessions, already his to have and enjoy, and had given them away to the poor. Thus he

could continue to serve as an excellent example for all the friars by representing the tradition of their father and founder, as if he were still alive. In the words of the text, he ordered—again, terms for prescribing and commanding: *precipio et volo*—that everyone love Bernard as if he were Francis himself, and specified that the minister general, others of the order's hierarchy, and all of the friars look upon Bernard as they would Francis. Unmistakably his choice of words served to designate a specific succession, but not in the authority structure of the Order of Friars Minor, nor by making Bernard an official of the order. Rather, they give notice of a transfer to Bernard of the task of true, effective, and continual good example. Bernard also received the specific right of intervening with the superiors anytime any sign became evident of decadence or drifting from the original purpose. In this way the balance that Francis had established between *norm* and *dedication,* between *rule* as a juridical entity and *evangelical living,* was brought to a crowning conclusion. The Franciscan life was a permanently held ideal to follow Christ, starting with the rule. They were not to see the rule as a more or less flexible limit, but as a point of departure for ever higher perfection. All the saint's actions were directed toward implementing his final plan: a rule, solemnly approved by the pope; a model friary, the Portiuncula; and a model friar, Bernard. The earthly mission of Francis could now be considered complete. He, therefore, amidst the sorrow and love of all, could prepare himself to wait for sister death.

Even in his final passing he wanted to observe poverty. Meanwhile there began around him the dreary maneuvering of those who saw the future saint in the dying man and who wanted to lay hold of the relics and the remains. This was the reason behind the guardian's prohibition to Francis lest he give away any personal item to anyone among the friars. It was simply a repetition of an order already given, that came about because everyone, including the friars, claimed more or less imaginary needs in order to acquire something of his—be it a remnant of a

sleeve or part of a tunic—that would qualify as a relic. To an order that regarded him as being already dead, the saint gave an interpretation that gladdened his heart: he felt that he was truly and completely poor, since he was not even able to give away the miserable garments that covered him, not even to the poor. As he felt his life ebbing away, he asked that the friars lay him on the bare ground, on that earth which he had called, and her alone, sister and mother.

Francis died during the night of October 3 and 4, 1226. On Saturday evening, if we accept the word of those who were present, an extraordinary and marvelous song of larks accompanied his passing. The "sisters" whom he had loved above all birds, creatures of God, wanted to express themselves to the man who had most understood and loved the sweetness of their harmony, drawing from it the beauty and goodness of God.

What followed was characteristic of the sorrowing stages of any funeral event. There was a vigil maintained by the inhabitants of Assisi. Their fear was that he might go elsewhere from the Portiuncula, while forgetting that at one time they had insulted him and covered him with mud. There were also the liturgical solemnities. One distinct element occurred that suffices to show that, for his contemporaries, through the medium of "fama publica," a genuine and living bond existed between Francis and Clare. Since she had not been able to see him when he left the bishop's palace for St. Mary of the Angels, on the morning after his death "the people of Assisi, men and women and all the clergy,"—Guido happened to be away—"came in search of his body in the friary. To the chant of hymns and canticles, holding green palms in their hands, they bore him by the will of God to San Damiano, so that the word the Lord had spoken by the mouth of his saint might be fulfilled and that his daughters and servants might be consoled. The iron grill of the window through which the sisters received Holy Communion and heard the word of God was pulled back; the brothers lifted up the body of blessed Francis

from the stretcher and held it in their arms before the opening for at least a minute. Lady Clare and her sisters experienced a very great consolation from this. Nevertheless they wept bitterly and felt great pain; for, next to God, the holy Father was their one and only consolation in this world."